

Hopeful Realism:
A Theological Ethic of Contemporary Conflict,
Reflecting Critically on the Writings of Karl Barth and H. Richard Niebuhr
Concerning the Second World War

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Abstract

Karl Barth and H. Richard Niebuhr both attempted to understand the Second World War in theologically realistic fashions. Barth has been termed a “critically realistic thinker” in recent scholarship, as he uses both realism and idealism to argue against anthropocentric theology and ethics, including traditional just-war theories. He maintains that God must always be primary, the one who determines good and evil; therefore theology and ethics must always be theocentric not anthropocentric. Good is, according to Barth, that which God commands. This leads him to argue for a divine-command ethic in which God speaks to concrete persons in concrete situations.

H. Richard Niebuhr, who belonged to the Christian Realists in the United States, argues from a very similar theological basis as Barth, but ends up with an ethics of responsibility rather than a divine-command morality. According to Niebuhr, human beings are responders, who respond in answer to prior action upon them. The primary question for ethics is therefore what is happening, to what must I respond in this situation and how ought I respond to it. In attempting to determine the fitting response, one must also attempt to understand what the response to my responding action will be. This model assists in understanding the events that lead up to and occur during war and can help to build a more stable peace.

Both Barth and Niebuhr attempted to understand the particular events of the Second World War in a theological and Christian way. Their insights provide assistance in our response to situations that may require the governmental use of force, i.e. military action, peacekeeping missions and humanitarian missions. The world situation, however, has changed since World War II; there are now more armed conflicts between non-State groups, such as civil and ethnic wars. Therefore, both Barth and Niebuhr’s ethics of war from that time require some modification to deal with current events. Barth’s theological rejection of anthropocentrism remains the framework for any Christian ethic dealing with contemporary uses of military force, but his divine-command morality leaves little room for moral debate and discussion, especially in a multi-cultural setting. H. Richard Niebuhr’s ethics of

response provides a model for ethical decision-making which allows for moral discourse amongst various persons of different cultures and religions. It also helps us to understand the situations to which governments may have to respond with force. Yet Niebuhr's ethics, with its emphasis on the question of what is happening in a given situation, has difficulty in providing assistance for contemporary decision making concerning the use of force. By bringing Barth and Niebuhr into dialogue with each other concerning the Second World War, we can see how a theology of hopeful realism aids us in forming a model for Christian ethical decision-making concerning the use of force in the current situation. This hopefully realistic model, based on interpreting God's activity in history, takes the situation seriously yet is able to respond to that situation with Christian hope. It does this by understanding human beings not as rational beings who seek logic and rationality in all their experiences but as symbol users who strive to understand themselves and their world by means of symbols, or patterns, from their past. For Christians, Jesus Christ is central to the symbols they use. This then provides for the use of Trinitarian symbols to understand the ethical problem presented by war.

Introduction

The Second World War was a defining moment for modern culture. Many Europeans and Americans, including churches and theologians, struggled to interpret and engage World War II. Many of these interpretations moved in a realistic direction, rather than in a naively idealistic one. This movement toward realism was not limited to theology, but included literature, journalism and the arts and can be seen in the writing of the time from many different countries, such as the literature of Thomas Mann, a German who lived in exile in the United States¹, and the poetry of the Czech Miroslav Holub². That war was understood not as an opportunity to demonstrate a nation's greatness, but as a necessary evil. The phrase that was so prevalent during the First World War, that this was the war to end all wars, was not much used during the Second. It was a tragic event brought about by human failing or, in theological terms, human sinfulness.

We will look at two important theologians who interpreted and engaged World War II: Karl Barth and H. Richard Niebuhr. Their contexts and, therefore their understandings of the war were very different – Barth was Swiss and Niebuhr American; their theological and philosophical inheritances were radically different. Barth was raised in German liberal theology and counted Adolf von Harnack and Wilhelm Hermann amongst his teachers; Niebuhr completed his Ph. D. at Yale on Ernst Troeltsch; he was also decisively influenced by the American pragmatism of William James. Yet their interpretations also have remarkable similarities: both attempted to interpret the war in a realistic, rather than idealistic way; both were very suspicious of liberal idealism and attempts to interpret war in ways that concentrate on human actions and moral ideals rather than on God. They both saw this interpretation as anthropocentric rather than theocentric. They both therefore centred their interpretation of World War Two on divine action and human response. This, they argued, made for a genuinely *theological* ethic.

¹ See, for example, (Mann 1938) and (Mann 1944).

² See especially (Holub 1990)

The reason for examining these two theologians ethics of World War Two is that they both understood the war in a realistic fashion, while remaining distinctively Christian. H. Richard Niebuhr belonged to the Christian Realist school in the United States. Barth's theological realism has been well documented in recent literature, most notably in Bruce McCormack's *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*.³ However, his ethics have been criticised as nothing more than some sort of intuition, allowing for no moral argument. We will look at that argument below.

H. Richard Niebuhr appreciated Barth's theocentric base, yet built a radically different ethics on it. Niebuhr's *ethics of response* builds on Barth's theological anthropocentrism and takes the situation seriously for ethical decision-making. Unfortunately, Niebuhr died before he was able to complete his ethical system, leaving only his *The Responsible Self*,⁴ which is less theological than philosophical. James Gustafson, in his introduction to this book, laments the fact that Niebuhr did not have the opportunity to publish his thoughts concerning "The Principles of Christian Action" and "Christian Responsibility in the Common Life,"⁵ which would have contained more of Niebuhr's specifically theological thought. Both Barth and Niebuhr agreed that God must remain subject in theology and ethics and developed their theology and ethics, albeit in different ways, on the understanding of divine action as primary and human action as secondary.

This centre of divine action and human response led both of them to analyse the actual concrete circumstances and events in order to form their ethical responses to World War Two. This in turn gave both Barth and Niebuhr a distinctive perspective on the classical understandings of war – the just war theory and pacifism.⁶ These theories were rejected by both, albeit for somewhat different reasons. For Barth, the just war is rejected as being anthropocentric; we, with or without divine assistance, try to determine the proper course of actions ourselves. God may provide the criteria, but they are meaningless unless we apply them to the current situation. Pacifism, on the other hand, is rejected by Barth as being too naively optimistic, ignoring the concrete situation. Niebuhr rejects the just war theory

³ (McCormack 1995).

⁴ (Niebuhr 1963)

⁵ See (Niebuhr 1963), 6-41.

⁶ For a historical analysis of Christian responses to war, see (Bainton 1960)

because it cannot provide the necessary means to interpret human experience during wartime, especially the fact that it is the relatively innocent who suffer most during wartime. It was not the Nazi leadership who suffered as a result of the war; it was the relatively innocent in cities like Dresden and Hamburg, or London and Coventry, who had to endure the war's brutality. Niebuhr also rejects pacifism, which he classifies into two types: firstly, a separatist pacifism, which argues that the world is so evil, and war is the ultimate expression of that evil, so that Christians must totally separate themselves from it. Niebuhr rejects this because it is firstly impossible to separate one self from the world; secondly, he rejects it because it necessitates the assumption that God also has rejected the world, an idea which is, according to Niebuhr, unchristian. The second type, idealistic pacifism, which claims that war is immoral and we must be moral and therefore reject war as an option in international (and national) relations. This view, however, fails to take seriously the problem of sin in the world and does not account for the fact that, as a result of a nations unilateral rejection of military conflict, greater social injustice may result.

By looking at both Niebuhr and Barth's interpretation of World War Two, we will gain a better understanding of a theologically realistic ethic which takes the circumstances seriously yet remains distinctively Christian. This, in turn, will serve to help us formulate a hopeful realist Christian ethic, which takes into account all of the relevant information about any situation from as many sources as possible, yet remains theocentric rather than anthropocentric. The situation has changed dramatically since World War Two, so that as both Barth and Niebuhr realised, their ethics from that time must also be revised if they are to be relevant to today.

This study deals almost exclusively with the Western Theatre of World War Two. The main reason for this is that both Barth and Niebuhr wrote predominantly about Europe; for Barth in Switzerland the explanation for this is obvious; Niebuhr, on the other hand, as an American was involved in fighting in both the European and Pacific Theatres. However, his father immigrated to the United States from Germany and his connections were all with Europe. He did write about the Manchurian Crisis, which we will discuss this below. Otherwise, the scope of this paper is exclusively Europe.

We also will not be dealing extensively with the problems presented by the Holocaust.⁷ This is a very important area of work, which would require a large expansion of the present project in order to begin to do it justice. We will look briefly at both Barth and Niebuhr's understanding of the Holocaust in terms of their ethics concerning war. There have been several studies of Barth's relationship to Judaism.

For the most part, I have limited this work to Barth's writing from 1920 to 1945 with occasional references to his later work. The single major exception to this is his discussion of war in volume III.4 of the *Church Dogmatics*, which was published in 1951, although portions of it date back to before 1945. As Barth's later writing built on the foundation of his earlier writings, most notably the *Church Dogmatics*, the arguments presented here are consistent, with some minor modifications, with Barth's later work. Niebuhr, on the other hand, did not publish as much during this period and only published his major systematic works after the war, so that we will look to all of his writing, including his later writings such as *The Responsible Self*, which was published in 1963. Similarly to Barth, Niebuhr remained relatively consistent in his position throughout his career, so that this does not present a problem for this argument.

The first chapter looks at Christian Realism as a distinctive theological movement in the United States and discusses Barth's relationship to it. The point is not to show that Barth was a Christian Realist, but rather that he and the Christian Realists shared certain points in common with each other, most notably in their rejection of the liberal theological tradition in favour of a theocentric theology and ethics. The next two chapters will look at Barth and Niebuhr's understandings of the Second World War. As theology and ethics cannot be separated from each other, we will discuss their theology in general before moving to their ethics of war. We will be attempting to gain a clear understanding of their thought without critiquing it at this point. Chapter 4 will then critique their positions and demonstrate how each person's thought can compliment the others. In essence, I will argue that one can be true to Barth's theology while rejecting his divine-command ethics for Niebuhr's ethics of response. The final chapter will then build on the fourth chapter to argue for

⁷ There are many good books available concerning the issues presented by the Holocaust. Two important texts are: (Jones 1999) and (Rubenstein and Roth 1987).

a hopefully realistic ethics of war that is realistic in understanding the situation while, at the same time, hopeful because of God's activity in history.

The citations are given in the main text in English. Where the translation has been significantly modified, this is noted in the reference. The German word *Mensch* and other gender-exclusive terms have been translated inclusively as *person* and other gender-exclusive terms have also been translated inclusively. For Niebuhr (and other English language quotations) the citations have not been modified.

It is important to note that when the name *Niebuhr* occurs in the text, it is referring to H. Richard Niebuhr and not his better-known brother, Reinhold. Where this is unclear, I have included the first name.

Chapter 1: Christian Realism, Karl Barth and H. Richard Niebuhr

The First World War caused a radical change in theology. Nineteenth century theology, especially in Europe, had been dominated a liberal optimism concerning human ability to bring about the kingdom of God on earth. As William James stated in 1907: “Optimism has always been the regnant *doctrine* in European philosophy.”⁸ The war shattered this belief and posed serious questions to theology. Two responses to the crisis, which were to have lasting influence on the theological thought that followed, were Neo-orthodoxy⁹ and Christian Realism. Neo-Orthodoxy was largely a European movement in theology, centred in the German-speaking world. Christian Realism, on the other hand, was mainly a North American movement whose adherents included, in addition to H. Richard Niebuhr, Reinhold Niebuhr, Walter Horton, John Bennett, Henry P. van Dusen and Samuel Calvert. Barth was one of the most prominent leaders of Neo-Orthodoxy, which was a broad movement encompassing a variety of very different thinkers including, at various times, Emil Brunner, Rudolf Bultmann, Friedrich Gogarten and Paul Tillich. We will look primarily at Barth’s relationship to Christian Realism (including H. Richard Niebuhr) and through that, the relationship between neo-orthodoxy and Christian Realism. We will then be in a better position to discuss Barth and Niebuhr’s ethical thought concerning the Second World War.

In order to discuss Christian Realism, we must first define what it is and then discuss Karl Barth’s relationship to it. The first section will therefore be a very brief discussion of *realism* followed by a discussion of Christian Realism. Karl Barth and Neo-Orthodoxy’s relationship to realism is tenuous at best. Recent scholarship on

⁸ (James 1907), 125.

⁹ Neo-orthodoxy is one of several titles used to describe the theological movement in continental Europe following World War One and which included such varied persons as Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and Rudolf Bultmann. This movement was not very united in its outlook and broke apart in the 1930’s but its adherents shared several characteristics, which will be discussed below.

Barth has, to some extent, classified his theology as realistic, although his is a unique type of realism.¹⁰

Both Christian Realism and Neo-Orthodoxy developed in the nineteen-twenties and -thirties as a response to the catastrophe of the First World War. Before the war, theology was dominated by an optimistic Liberalism that argued that humanity was improving itself and would continue to do so, thereby building the kingdom of God on earth. Johannes Weiss wrote in 1892:

The real difference between our modern Protestant world view and that of primitive Christianity is, therefore, that we do not share the eschatological attitude. ... We no longer pray "may grace come and the world pass away," but we pass our lives in joyful confidence that *this* world will evermore become the show place of the people of God.¹¹

There was thus an agreement between human desire and action and the divine will and action so that human action, dependent upon God's grace, would bring the kingdom of God on earth into being. One component of this optimism was an epistemological confidence that grew out of the Enlightenment. Christian Thomasius, writing in the seventeenth century, stated:

The truth is therefore nothing other than the correspondence of human thoughts with the created things external to those thoughts.

You do not have to ask here if understanding corresponds to the things or if the things correspond to the understanding; this harmony is rather so created, that neither is the guiding principle of the other. The harmony of both is presupposed, other than the fact that the external things are the starting point of this process.

This is so because the things are created so that they can be comprehended by human beings and the understanding is so created that it can comprehend the external things.¹²

Science provided the link between human desires and the divine will. Liberal theology was tremendously optimistic about human potential and ability to transform the world into the kingdom of God. It was divine grace that gave us this capacity, we

¹⁰ For the clearest example of this, see (McCormack 1995). We will discuss this below. There have also been recent example of this in German Barth studies, including (Spieckermann 1985), a book that was crucial for McCormack; see also (Beintker 1987), especially chapter IV. Section 5: "Barth's Philosophical Orientation as and Example of the Ordering of Philosophy to Theological Thinking."

¹¹ (Weiss 1971), 135.

¹² (Thomasius), 128 (Section 62).

merely had to use this God-given ability to build God's kingdom on earth. Up until the war, the kingdom of God was understood to be the very obtainable goal of the historical process of human development. The Church and world were working together toward the same goal - building the kingdom of God on Earth – and we were well on the way to achieving this goal. Adolf von Harnack wrote in 1894:

Before proceeding to deal with the problem itself, I must call attention to a fact that may well inspire us with hope and gladness. Throughout the whole civilized world questions are now being discussed concerning economic arrangements and the relations between capital and labor; this in itself proof that much social work has already been accomplished. It is not long since culture, rights and human dignity were the monopoly of some few thousands amongst all the inhabitants of Europe, while the great masses of people lived dreary lives under tyrannous oppression, possessing neither rights nor education, their whole existence being one long misery. Today, on the contrary – at least in our own country, and among other kindred nations – all citizens are equal in the eyes of the law; all enjoy the same legal protection; slavery and serfdom are things of the past; a fair amount of knowledge and education are within the reach of all; and labor is respected. Liberty, equality and fraternity are in many ways no mere empty words, but the real framework of our individual and social life, the pillars of the building we are raising. All this has been accomplished in the lifetime of a few generations, and it is absurd to question the fact of progress, amidst improvements so obvious and immense.¹³

Walter Rauschenbusch could be even more direct at the conclusion of his *Christianity and the Social Crisis*:

Perhaps these nineteen centuries of Christian influence have been a long preliminary stage of growth, and now the flower and fruit are almost here. If at this juncture we can rally sufficient religious faith and moral strength to snap the bonds of evil and turn the present unparalleled economic and intellectual resources of humanity to the harmonious development of a true social life, the generations yet unborn will mark this as a great day of the Lord for which the ages waited, and count us blessed for sharing in the apostolate that proclaimed it.¹⁴

The First World War and the events that followed in the United States shattered these illusions about human potentiality. There was a very active progressive movement in American politics in the period leading up to the First World War. President

¹³ (Harnack 1894), 271.

¹⁴ (Rauschenbusch 1907), 422.

Woodrow Wilson was one of the representatives of this movement, which expressed itself most forcibly in their support for a League of Nations.¹⁵ In the aftermath of this loss of hope, several movements within theology sprang up. Christian fundamentalism, which had been present in American theology since the early nineteenth century, gained more adherents. Atheism also made inroads in both Europe and America. Existentialism also can trace its roots back to this period. Many Christians became active in the ecumenical movement as a way to prevent further outbreaks of war. Two theological responses to this crisis were Christian Realism and Neo-orthodoxy; Christian Realism grew out of both the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey and the theological realism of theologians like Walter Marshall Horton and Douglas Clyde Macintosh; and Neo-orthodoxy, lead by Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, amongst others.

There is much debate not only about what the movement that sprung up in Germany after the First World War ought to be called, but also, indeed, whether or not this was a single movement at all. A discussion about these issues lies well beyond the scope of this work, but for our purposes we will call this movement Neo-orthodoxy and operate under the assumption that all of the theologians associated with this movement were responding, albeit in very different ways, to the loss of hope brought about by the First World War. Barth located his crisis with liberal theology at the outbreak of the First World War, when a manifesto supporting the Kaiser's war efforts was signed by almost all (with the exception of Martin Rade) of

¹⁵ For an excellent study on Wilson and the Progressivists in the United States, see (Knock 1992). Knock maintains that President Wilson was responsible for the failure of the Progressivists and of the United States entering the League of Nations: "Although he continued to be the chief agent of the [Progressivist] movement by virtue of the Fourteen Points and the Original Covenant of February 1919 – and the preponderance of progressive internationalists fully appreciated these outstanding accomplishments – Wilson had made crucial mistakes long before the treaty [which founded the League of Nations and ended World War One] was in the Senate. He had neglected to play the steady role of propagandist and educator; he had allowed the coalition of 1916 to unravel, primarily by refusing to acknowledge his administration's culpability in the wartime reaction and to take any serious action to combat it; and from 1918 onward, he was either unable or unwilling to accept the implications of "Progressive Democracy" and "war socialism" and take the next logical step beyond them. The result was the erosion of the domestic base and the depletion of the political environment essential to both ratification and to the American leadership in a progressive, as opposed to conservative, league movement. By the summer of 1919, Wilson had barely any strategy at all, except to rely upon his own dwindling rhetorical gifts." (268). It is unclear what role the circumstances following the war played in the failure of Wilson's progressiveness and Knock does not look in detail at this.

his theological teachers in Germany.¹⁶ Although this was a powerful demonstration of the failure of liberal theology, Barth's concerns with liberal theology can be dated earlier than this.¹⁷ The manifesto merely underscored the death of liberal theology in Europe that had begun already before 1914.

Christian Realism in America also came about in response to the loss of faith in human potential. The crisis took somewhat longer in the United States than in Europe; World War One was only the beginning of this loss of faith, as the United States entered the war late, shortly before it ended, so that the country was spared the experience of most of the tragic suffering of the war. This is even more the case as the United States is geographically so far removed from the battlefields of the war. President Wilson's Fourteen Point peace plan to end the war was an expression of American optimistic idealism. When introducing it for ratification to the U. S. Senate, he stated:

The stage is set, the destiny disclosed. It has come about by no plan of our conceiving, but by the hand of God who led us into this way. We cannot turn back. We can only go forward, with lifted eyes and freshened spirit to follow the vision. It was of this that we dreamed at our birth. America shall in truth show the way. The light streams upon the path ahead, and nowhere else.¹⁸

His failure to force through this plan for peace against the vengeful desires of the French and British after World War One and the conservative elements in the U. S. government deepened this crisis of faith in human ability to build God's kingdom on Earth; this loss of faith was then completed by the depression. The causes for this loss of optimism in America are not clear:

If, then American progressivism was damaged by the First World War, the reason must be sought in some aspect of the particular case. A number of such aspects have been pointed to by historians. One possibility is that the pre-war reform movement depended upon assumptions about human progress that were discredited by the occurrence of such an appalling conflict. Another is that progressivism was fatally weakened by the divisions created among its supporters by the new issues of foreign policy, above all the question of American intervention. Still another is that domestic reform suffered from the postwar public reaction against American involvement just because the

¹⁶ See (Busch 1975), p 93f.

¹⁷ See (McCormack 1995), 111-117.

¹⁸ Quoted in: (Link 1969), 132.

Wilson Administration had justified this so largely in terms of “the Progressive values and the Progressive language.” Each of these explanations posses at least some truth, yet no one of them is adequate in itself. The first implies a more radical discontinuity in the whole tradition of American reform thought than most historians have observed. The second does not explain why differences of view on foreign policy questions – which, however important, were transitory – had a more fatal effect upon the progressive movement than the deep divisions had always existed within it over such domestic issues as the trusts or prohibition. The third applies only to the period after the war, by which time the strength of progressive sentiment had clearly been much reduced. The relative significance of these and other connections between the war and progressivism can be assessed only by studying the subject as a whole.¹⁹

This is not a study of this loss of hope in America after the First World War.²⁰ It is as a response to this loss of optimism about human ability that theologians such as Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, John C. Bennett and D. C. Macintosh formulated what came to be called Christian Realism.

Both Neo-orthodoxy and Christian Realism sprang out of this experience of hopelessness; Neo-orthodoxy exploded in continental Europe following the war; Christian Realism came about somewhat more gradually in the States during the 1920’s. Although responding to similar affects the war had on theology in Europe and the States, they are nonetheless different in their outlooks. One very important reason for this was the American philosophical movement pragmatism, which stemmed from the work of Charles Peirce and William James and was virtually unknown in Europe.²¹ Peirce, in his well-known essay “What Pragmatism is” wrote:

Endeavoring ... to formulate what he so approved, he framed the theory that a *conception*, that is, the rational purport of a word or other expression, lies exclusively in its conceivable bearing upon the conduct of life; so that, since obviously nothing that might not result from experiment can have any direct bearing upon conduct, if one can define accurately all the conceivable experimental phenomena which the affirmation or denial of a concept could

¹⁹ (Thompson 1987), 2.

²⁰ For more information on the loss of hope in America in the twenties, see (Noggle 1974), which includes a bibliographic essay and Thompson, cited above, which provides a much broader interpretation than the title might imply.

²¹ It is significant to note that neither William James nor Charles Peirce are mentioned in Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*, nor is pragmatism. Realism is discussed in *Church Dogmatics II.1* in relation to Barth’s discussion of the reality of God, but nowhere else. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, while studying at Union theological Seminary in New York in 1930-1931 studied “almost the complete philosophical works of William James” which he found “fascinating.” See (Bethge 1970), 119-120.

imply, one will have therein a complete definition of the concept, and *there is nothing more to it*. For this doctrine he invented the name *pragmatism*. . . . Now quite the most striking feature of the new theory was its recognition of an inseparable connection between rational cognition and rational purpose; and that consideration it was which determined the preference for the name *pragmatism*.²²

A little further in the same essay, Peirce wrote:

Your problem would be greatly simplified, if, instead of saying that you want to know the “Truth,” you were simply to say that you want to attain a state of belief unassailable by doubt.

Belief is not a momentary mode of consciousness; it is a habit of mind essentially enduring for some time, and mostly (at least) unconscious . . .²³

William James applied Peirce’s more secular philosophy to the religious realm.

James wrote:

On pragmatic principles we can not reject any hypothesis if consequences useful to life flow from it. Universal conceptions, as things to take account of, may be as real for pragmatism as particular sensations are. They have, indeed, no meaning and no reality if they have no use. But if they have any use they have that amount of meaning. And the meaning will be true if the use squares well with life’s other uses.²⁴

James continues this section, entitled “Pragmatism and Religion,” by applying that principle to religious truth. Towards the end, he wrote:

On pragmatistic principles, if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, it is true. Now whatever its residual difficulties may be, experience shows that it certainly does work, and that the problem is to build it out and determine it so that it will combine satisfactorily with all the other working truths.²⁵

Pragmatism thus allowed the Christian Realists to argue for a kind of apologetic theology that was anathema to Barth. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote:

²² (Peirce 1905), 332.

²³ (Peirce 1905), 336

²⁴ (James 1907), 119.

²⁵ (James 1907), 131.

... there is nevertheless a positive apologetic task. It consists in correlating the truth, apprehended by faith and repentance, to truths about life and history gained generally in human experience.²⁶

Pragmatism was not used to demonstrate the truth of social theories or religions, but to “show that one or another of them provides a better way of anticipating future events and making choices in light of the likely outcomes.”²⁷ The tradition of pragmatism that American theologians had access to accounts for many of the differences between their theology and that of continental Europe.

Christian Realism, because it is applied to a very broad movement within American theology is difficult to define precisely. Most scholars define it by referring to three kinds of realism: political realism, moral realism and theological realism. The structure of this chapter will follow that definition. We will first discuss realism and then move on to political, moral and theological realism. This will enable us to get a clearer understanding of the nature of realism. Following this, we will look at how these three types of realism interact within Christian Realism.

Throughout the following discussion, we will also compare some aspects Karl Barth’s thought to Christian Realism. We will also take a brief look at some current Barth literature that has classified him as a realist.

Realism

Walter Marshall Horton wrote in his 1934 book, *Realistic Theology* that:

... the word “realism” suggest to me, above all, a resolute to determination to face all the facts of life candidly, beginning preferably with the most stubborn perplexing, and disheartening ones, so that any lingering romantic illusions may be dispelled at the start; and then, through these stubborn facts and not in spite of them, to pierce as deep as one may into the solid structure of objective reality, until one finds whatever ground of courage, hope, and faith is actually there independent of human preferences and desires, and so casts anchor in that ground.²⁸

²⁶ (Niebuhr 1949) 165.

²⁷ (Lovin 1995), 40.

²⁸ (Horton 1934), 38.

To assert that something exists independent of a mind's apprehension of it is to move in the realist direction, to deny this is to move in the opposite direction. That serves as a very basic definition of realism, which is less a single school of thought than a direction. Charles Peirce wrote:

That is *real* which has such and such characters, whether anybody thinks it to have those characters or not. ...
That which any true proposition asserts is *real*, in the sense of being as it is regardless of what you or I may think of it.²⁹

In medieval philosophy, realism was opposed by nominalism and conceptualism. D. M. Armstrong described the debate between Nominalism and Realism:

There is one sense in which everybody agrees that particulars have properties and stand in relation to other particulars. The piece of paper before me is particular. It is white, so it has a property. It rests upon a table, so it is related to another particular. Such gross facts are not, or should not be, in dispute between Nominalists and Realists.

G. E. More never tired of emphasizing that in the case of many of the great metaphysical disputes the gross facts are not in dispute. What is in dispute, he contended, is the account or analysis to be given of the gross facts. This appears to be the situation in the dispute between Nominalism and Realism. Both can agree that the paper is white and rests upon a table. It is an adequacy-condition of their analyses that such statements come out true. But the analyses themselves are utterly different.

We start with a basic agreement, then: that in some minimal or pre-analytic sense there are things that having certain properties and standing in certain relations. But, as Plato was the first to point out, this situation is a profoundly puzzling one, at least for philosophers. The same property can belong to different things. The same relation can relate to different things. Apparently, there can be something identical in things which are not identical. Things are one at the same time as they are many. How is this possible? Nominalists and Realists react to the puzzle in different ways. Nominalists deny that there is any genuine or objective identity in things which are not identical. Realists, on the other hand, hold that the apparent situation is the real situation. There genuinely is, or can be, something identical in things which are not identical. Besides particulars, there are universals.³⁰

F. H. Bradley neatly represented the nominalist position in 1908 when he wrote that

²⁹ (Peirce 1905), 342, 343.

³⁰ (Armstrong 1978), 10-11.

... experience means something much the same as given and present fact. We perceive, on reflection, that to be real, or even barely to exist, must be to fall within sentience. Sentient experience, in short, is reality, and what is not this is not real. We may say, in other words, that there is no being outside that which is commonly called psychical experience. Feeling, thought, and volition (any groups under which we class psychical phenomena) are all the material of existence, and there is not other material, actual or even possible.³¹

A realist would argue that to say that this wood is hard is to assert that the substance *wood* has the property of *hardness*. The predicative property of ‘hardness’ exists *external* to our thinking. Unlike substances, properties are predicative, which is to say that it is their nature to exist as a property of something else. However, they do really exist. Conceptualists would argue that nothing predicative exists independently of thought. To say that the wood is hard is merely to assert that our concept ‘hard,’ which does not exist apart from our concept of hardness, applies to this wood. Hardness thus exists only as a concept in our mind. A nominalist would want to carry the conceptualist argument further by arguing that ‘hard’ is merely a word, dependent on a particular language, not just on a mode of thought.

Since the Enlightenment, realism has been opposed by idealism, which argues that there is no access to reality apart from the mind’s perceptions and the mind can only reveal its own contents to us. Reality is therefore located in the mind. Realism argues, on the other hand, that the objects we perceive exist independently of our perception of them.³² The problem with realism has to do with truth-claims. To know something is to believe it because it is true, but to assume that a belief is true in the realist sense is not to explain why it is believed. In other words, if what we observe can be explained by various mutually exclusive theories, on what basis, other than intuition or luck, are we to choose the correct one? Realism seems to require that humans have a “God’s eye” view of reality – the ability to know what things are in themselves. We will return to this below.

³¹ (Bradley 1908), 144.

³² There is an ongoing discussion in current post-modern philosophical debate concerning realism. We will only touch on this debate very briefly in this article. For more information about the realist – anti-realist debate, see (Dummett 1993) and (Putnam and Conant 1990). For information about the movement in contemporary theology called *Christian Non-Realism*, see (Crowder 1997).

This problem has led in recent times to an anti-realist response. Michael Dummett is one of the leading representatives of this point of view. He builds on Frege's philosophy of language, arguing against the concept of *bivalence* – that an assertoric sentence must be either true or false. He wrote:

... I shall take as my preferred characterization of a dispute between realists and anti-realists one which represents it as relating, not to a class of entities or a class of terms but to a class of *statements*, which may be, e. g., statements about the physical world, statements about mental events, processes or states, mathematical statements, statements in the past tense, statements in the future tense, etc. This class I shall, from now on, term 'the disputed class'. Realism I characterize as the belief that statements of the disputed class possess an objective truth-value, independently of our means of knowing it: they are true or false in virtue of a reality existing independently of us. The anti-realist opposes to this the view that statements in the disputed class are to be understood only by reference to the sort of thing which we count as evidence for a statement of that class. That is, the realist holds that the meanings of statements of the disputed class are not directly tied to the kind of evidence for them we can have, but consist in the manner of their determination as true or false by states of affairs whose existence is not dependent on our possession of evidence for them. The anti-realist insists, on the contrary, that the meanings of these statements are tied directly to what we count as evidence for them, in such a way that a statement of the disputed class, if true at all, can be true only in virtue of something which we could know and which we should count as evidence for its truth.³³

Dummett argues that language must have a compositional semantics, but rejects the association of sentence meaning with truth-conditions, preferring to associate meaning with assertibility-conditions. We cannot grasp circumstances in which a sentence would be true independent of any evidence that might bear on its truth; we cannot grasp the meaning of an assertion *an sich*. However, we can recognise the circumstances to the point that we can justify an assertion. So we can only give justifications for the assertion, not make any absolute truth claims. If we have no access to truth on an epistemological level, then we also have no access to truth on a semantic level.

³³ (Dummett 1963), 146.

Barth and Realism

How, then, does Barth relate to realism? Recent studies argue that he is a realist, although his realism was of a unique kind. For Barth, God is the truly real, as only God exists in Godself, independent of any human perceptions about God. Our beliefs about God can therefore only be judged by reference to God. Wolfgang Ullmann pointed to this in his analysis of Barth's *Fides quaerens intellectum*³⁴ when he wrote:

But let us recall once again the entire weight of the crucial centre on the Anselm-thesis, the identity of God and truth. On the basis of this, one can be clear that the position of Barth, as here described, is not a connection point with the so-called natural theology, whatever one means by that. The decisive contradiction is not: acceptance or rejection of natural theology. The decisive disjunction is much more between a theology of word-games that is indifferent to the truth and a theology that holds to the definiteness of truth and, thereby, also to the risk of falsification...³⁵

Wolfhart Schlichting stated the matter even more decisively:

Belief leaves no area, however partial, to unbelievers, but takes up the fight with them for the entire reality. It does not merely erect a small over-reality, but reality completely. ... It must stand firm.³⁶

This, however, presents a problem for Barthian realism, as sinful humans have no access to knowledge about God. This leads Barth to the miracle of Jesus Christ. God revealed Godself to humanity in Jesus Christ. The problem remains, however, about how we recognise this knowledge as knowledge *about God* without having any prior concept of God and how we know that what we learn from Jesus' revelation is knowledge about God. Michael Beintker, referring to Barth's early essay "The Word of God and the Task of Ministry"³⁷, described this infinite, qualitative distinction between God and humanity as the primary dialectic of Barth:

³⁴ (Barth 1960)

³⁵ (Ullmann 1988), 84.

³⁶ (Schlichting 1971), 238.

³⁷ (Barth 1922)

“We cannot speak of God” *We* cannot do so – and this thought through a light of hope onto our situation –, because there is truly no way from the *sinful* person to God, neither a way of thought nor a way of experience. It is promise, because inversely a way from God to humanity is conceivable.³⁸

Beintker however does not address the question of how we recognise this knowledge as knowledge about God. As we have no natural, prior knowledge about God, how can we know what knowledge about God is? In response to this, Barth referred to the unveiling and veiling of God in Jesus Christ and the mystery of revelation. In essence, Barth argues that God is revealed in the human Jesus, but it is only by God’s grace that we can see God veiled in the human Jesus. In the end, however, he must leave the problem unsolved, claiming it is a mystery of faith that is, in turn, based on God’s divine election. By means of this election, humans are enabled to see the word of God in the Bible. How we are to recognise it as the word of God without any natural knowledge of God is never dealt with adequately by Barth.

It is also important to note a further aspect of Barth’s theology here. Humans must act as their nature requires. As *created* beings, they must act properly as created beings. The fall from Eden was the human attempt to be more than mere creation; Adam and Eve sought to “be like God, knowing good and evil.” [Genesis 3:5] this arrogant attempt to usurp God’s authority was sin. Jesus Christ, however, was not only fully human; he was also truly human in the way that we were meant to be.

Barth wrote:

If we listen to what Scripture says concerning humanity, then at the point when our attention and thoughts are allowed to rest there is revealed an elect human being, *the* elect human being, and united in Him and represented by Him an elect people. But just as truly there is revealed at the same point the electing God. The elect One is truly human according to God’s self-revelation, and that revelation, being God’s, has the decisive word concerning human beings too. And once again we must put it the other way: If we would know what election is, what it is to be elected by God, then we must look away from all others, and excluding all side-glances or secondary thoughts we must look only upon the name of Jesus Christ and upon the actual experience and history of the people whose beginning and end are enclosed in the mystery of His name.³⁹

³⁸ (Beintker 1987), 29. Beintker is quoting (Barth 1922), 186.

³⁹ (Barth 1957), 58-59.

As created beings, Barth argues, humans cannot determine good and evil themselves. Barth, as we will see below, argued for a divine – command ethics where God determines good and evil in every concrete situation. As creatures, humans must either obey or disobey God’s command.

There are therefore two important ways in which Barth is realistic: his doctrine of God’s reality in Godself; and his belief that Jesus Christ was truly human in the way we were meant to be but are incapable of being. We will be discussing this more below.

Much recent scholarship has, as mentioned above, classified Barth as a realist. Ingrid Spieckermann, in her 1983 doctoral dissertation⁴⁰ argued that:

The new question of knowledge of God is fundamentally the turn to *theological objectivity*. As in modern-liberal thinking the starting-point of anthropological subjectivity was inseparable from the subjective basis of religious experience and, and in the anthropological subjectivity ... so in this new element of history of theology, Barth’s thought, directed at a thorough overcoming of the starting-point in human subjectivity, found its entry-point in the theological objectivity ...⁴¹

Bruce McCormack’s 1995 book, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectal Theology: It’s Genesis and Development* has become one of the most important books in English Barth scholarship in recent times. McCormack re-interprets Barth and revises much of previous Barth scholarship, especially the von Balthasar thesis⁴².

⁴⁰ Published as (Spieckermann 1985)

⁴¹ (Spieckermann 1985), 73.

⁴² Von Balthasar argued that Barth underwent two conversions: “Just as Augustine underwent two conversions (the one from crass error to the true God and to Christianity and the other, much later, from the religious, Neoplatonizing philosophy of his youthful writings to true theology), so too in the development of Karl Barth there are two decisive turning-points. The first, the turn from liberalism to Christian radicalism took place during the First World War and found expression in the *Römerbrief*. The second is the end-point of his liberation from the shackles of philosophy in order to arrive at a truly independent theology. This second turning point took place after a nearly ten-year struggle, sometime around 1930. ‘The real document of this farewell ... from the remnants of a philosophical or anthropological ... grounding and exposition of the Christian doctrine ... is not the widely read little brochure *Nein!*, directed against Brunner in 1934, but rather the book on Anselm of Canterbury’s proof for the existence of God, which appeared in 1931.’” (Balthasar 1976), 101; quoted in: (McCormack 1995), 1. For von Balthasar and others, the first conversion in Barth was from liberal theology to dialectical theology and the second from dialectical theology to the *analogia fidei*. Recently, several scholars have convincingly argued that there was no second conversion for Barth, rather a change of emphasis to elements which were already present as early as the second edition of his commentary on Romans. In 1985, Ingrid Spieckermann argued that there was already in that book an early form of analogical thinking. In 1988 Michael Beintker argued that in Barth’s *Römerbrief* there was not only a form of the *analogia fidei* but also four different dialectics. Bruce McCormack,

His argument is very complex and this is not the place for a critical review of his work. We will instead look at Barth's realism and argue, in agreement with McCormack, that he is best understood as a critically realistic theologian. We will refer to McCormack's and to other's work in passing.

As mentioned above, Barth considered himself a *theologian* and does not deal with philosophy in any extended or consistent form. Thus, the phrase "critically realistic" applies primarily to his theology⁴³. To say that Barth was a realistic theologian is not to say that he abandoned all idealism in his work. McCormack wrote:

The "given" (or what we customarily think of as the "real") is the product of the knowing activity of the human subject. The word "realism" is meant to suggest, however, that Barth would always insist that the divine being was real, whole, and complete in itself apart from the knowing activity of the human subject; indeed, the reality of God precedes all human knowing. But the only way to secure this theological realism against idealistic constructivism was by *consistently* starting with it, rather than with (for example) an account of the gap between the ethical ideal and human life. The result would be a completely new framework for theological thinking. Barth would seek to ground theological reflection in the objectively real 'self pre-supposing divine objectivity' in revelation; i.e. to start from the reality of God.⁴⁴

Barth was therefore, and remained, *both* idealistic and realistic. God, the truly real, is diastatically related to the world, as Barth recognised as early as 1915: "World

building on both Spieckermann and Beintke's work, argues that Barth's Anselm book has been given too much importance in Barth studies and that the von Balthasar thesis should be rejected. See (Spieckermann 1985), esp. Chapter III. Sections 3-4; (Beintker 1987), esp. Chapter 5; (McCormack 1995), especially the Introduction. For a similar treatment on Barth's development which seeks to maintain the importance of Barth's Anselm book, see (Ullmann 1988).

⁴³ Which is not to say that philosophy did not play a role in his thinking as Michael Beintker argued. See his (Beintker 1987), where he wrote: "... Barth planned a comprehensive reflection on the relationship of theological work and philosophical thought-forms for the *Christian Dogmatics*. This can then be found then in the corresponding place in the *Church Dogmatics* – argued with more sophistication and enriched by concrete rules for theologians. According to Barth, it is unavoidable to interpret biblical texts or develop dogmatic reflections without philosophical 'lenses.' [(Barth 1927), 404] Everyone does this, even the simple reader of the Bible. 'Everyone has some philosophy, even if it is the most primitive, popular, aphoristic or eclectic ...' [(Barth 1985), 315]" 238-239. Wolfhart Schlichting argued that Barth has five rules for using philosophical-epistemological categories: " 1. One is aware that one is using them; 2. One attributes to them the character of an attempt or hypothesis; 3. One in no ways uses them as ends in themselves; 4. One's own epistemological schema has no basic priority to others ... 5. One uses them critically." (Schlichting 1971), 227. See also Chapter 2, Section B.

⁴⁴ (McCormack 1995), 67

remains world, but God is God.” The real was not the world known empirically for Barth. The truly real is the wholly otherness of the self-revealing God in conjunction with whom the world is mere shadow and appearance. The question is, therefore, how can we obtain knowledge about God, about true reality in this world of mere shadow and appearance. It is in answer to this question that the phrase critically realistic is most applicable. Critical realism describes a theological epistemology that witnesses to the mystery of divine action in revelation. The revealed Word of God, or revelation, has two components: the secular form and the divine content. Both *must* be present for revelation: focusing solely on the secular form alone leads to a purely realistic theology; focusing solely on the divine content alone leads to a purely idealistic theology and both are, according to Barth, bad theology. The synthesis, however, is humanly impossible. Only God can bring the synthesis about. God has done so in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, to which we will turn to more fully below. It is in this synthesis where, for Barth, realism and idealism come together and is what McCormack means by “critical realism.” It is realistic because in true reality, in other words, God is revealed. It is critical because the secular form is understood idealistically and is subject to criticism. Barth wrote:

Idealism guards the object of theology from confusion with all other objects In that it reminds us of God’s non-objectivity and therefore of the inadequacy of all human thinking and speaking about God. Idealism directs theological thinking and speaking to the God who, only in God’s genuine beyondness, is really God. Theology requires this antidote and this order. A theology, which has been purified of idealism, would be nothing other than a pagan monstrosity.⁴⁵

This theology is also critical because it attacks any attempt by human beings to achieve this synthesis on their own. That would be to mistake the secular form with the divine content and is what lead to Nazism. This Barth rejected in all of his work from the twenties onward. It also was very influential on Niebuhr’s thought.

⁴⁵ (Barth 1929), 77.

Political Realism

Political realism maintains that people who make political decisions make those decisions based on personal drives and then use moral discourse to hide their true reasons and to persuade others to agree with their policy. The forces that lead a person to act in a certain way may well be hidden even to that person. For a political realist, the language of morality is only relevant as a way to hide their real drives – such as self-interest and will-to-power – from others and possibly from her- or himself. Hans J. Morgenthau, a prominent political realist, argued that there are six main principles of political realism:

1. Political realism believes that politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature. In order to improve society it is first necessary to understand the laws by which society lives. The operation of these laws being impervious to our preferences, men will challenge them only at the risk of failure.

Realism, believing as it does in the objectivity of the laws of politics, must also believe in the possibility of developing a rational theory that reflects, however imperfectly and one-sidedly, these objective laws. It believes also, then, in the possibility of distinguishing in politics between truth and opinion-between what is true objectively and rationally, supported by evidence and illuminated by reason, and what is only a subjective judgment, divorced from the facts as they are and informed by prejudice and wishful thinking. ...

2. The main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined in terms of power. This concept provides the link between reason trying to understand international politics and the facts to be understood. It sets politics as an autonomous sphere of action and understanding apart from other spheres, such as economics (understood in terms of interest defined as wealth), ethics, aesthetics, or religion. Without such a concept a theory of politics, international or domestic, would be altogether impossible, for without it we could not distinguish between political and nonpolitical facts, nor could we bring at least a measure of systematic order to the political sphere. ...

Statesmen, especially under contemporary conditions, may well make a habit of presenting their foreign policies in terms of their philosophic and political sympathies in order to gain popular support for them. Yet they will distinguish with Lincoln between their "*overall* duty," which is to think and act in terms of the national interest, and their "*personal* wish," which is to see their own moral values and political principles realized throughout the world. Political realism does not require, nor does it condone, indifference to political ideals and moral principles, but it requires indeed a sharp distinction between the desirable and the possible-between what is desirable everywhere

and at all times and what is possible under the concrete circumstances of time and place. ...

3. Realism assumes that its key concept of interest defined as power is an objective category which is universally valid, but it does not endow that concept with a meaning that is fixed once and for all.

A small knowledge of human nature will convince us, that, with far the greatest part of mankind, interest is the governing principle; and that almost every man is more or less, under its influence. Motives of public virtue may for a time, or in particular instances, actuate men to the observance of a conduct purely disinterested; but they are not of themselves sufficient to produce persevering conformity to the refined dictates and obligations of social duty. Few men are capable of making a continual sacrifice of all views of private interest, or advantage, to the common good. It is vain to exclaim against the depravity of human nature on this account; the fact is so, the experience of every age and nation has proved it and we must in a great measure, change the constitution of man, before we can make it otherwise. No institution, not built on the presumptive truth of these maxims can succeed.

4. Political realism is aware of the moral significance of political action. It is also aware of the ineluctable tension between the moral command and the requirements of successful political action. And it is unwilling to gloss over and obliterate that tension and thus to obfuscate both the moral and the political issue by making it appear as though the stark facts of politics were morally more satisfying than they actually are, and the moral law less exacting than it actually is.

Realism maintains that universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states in their abstract universal formulation, but that they must be filtered through the concrete circumstances of time and place. The individual may say for himself: "*Fiat justitia, pereat mundus* (Let justice be done, even if the world perish)," but the state has no right to say so in the name of those who are in its care. Both individual and state must judge political action by universal moral principles, such as that of liberty. Yet while the individual has a moral right to sacrifice himself in defense of such a moral principle, the state has no right to let its moral disapprobation of the infringement of liberty get in the way of successful political action, itself inspired by the moral principle of national survival. There can be no political morality without prudence; that is, without consideration of the political consequences of seemingly moral action. Realism, then, considers prudence-the weighing of the consequences of alternative political actions-to be the supreme virtue in politics. Ethics in the abstract judges action by its conformity with the moral law; political ethics judges action by its political consequences. ...

5. Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe. As it distinguishes between truth and opinion, so it distinguishes between truth and idolatry. All nations are tempted-and few have been able to resist the temptation for long-to clothe their own particular aspirations and actions in the moral purposes of the universe. To know that nations are subject to the moral law is one thing, while to pretend to know with certainty what is good and evil in the relations

among nations is quite another. There is a world of difference between the belief that all nations stand under the judgment of God, inscrutable to the human mind, and the blasphemous conviction that God is always on one's side and that what one wills oneself cannot fail to be willed by God also. ... 6. The difference, then, between political realism and other schools of thought is real, and it is profound. However much the theory of political realism may have been misunderstood and misinterpreted, there is no gainsaying its distinctive intellectual and moral attitude to matters political. Intellectually, the political realist maintains the autonomy of the political sphere, as the economist, the lawyer, the moralist maintain theirs. ... The political realist is not unaware of the existence and relevance of standards of thought other than political ones. As political realist, he cannot but subordinate these other standards to those of politics. And he parts company with other schools when they impose standards of thought appropriate to other spheres upon the political sphere.⁴⁶

This kind of realism, as defined above, operates with a “hermeneutic of suspicion” that argues that things are never what they seem, nor are claims to be doing the “moral” thing to be taken at face value. A politician voting on a decision to increase or decrease aid to the poor is less influenced by any kind of idealism about the evil of poverty than she is by her own desire to maintain her power base and increase it if possible. The moral considerations are irrelevant to her decision. A modern example of this is Dean Acheson, an advisor to President Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis, who wrote concerning the crisis that, while the lives of thousands and millions of people were at stake, “those involved... will remember the irrelevance of the supposed moral considerations brought out in the discussions... moral talk did not bear on the problem.”⁴⁷ Some of the arguments presented to President Kennedy did have a moral flavour to them, such as Bobby Kennedy’s argument that an aerial bombardment of Cuban bases would be a Pearl Harbour in reverse. This position was rejected by Acheson as a mere obfuscation and part of an ‘emotional or intuitive’ response. As C. A. J. Coady put it:

... if moral considerations were not irrelevant, they were surprisingly lacking in weight when compared to other factors of a more obviously political or even personal kind, such as the need for President Kennedy to regain prestige, demonstrate his courage, and eliminate the prospect of

⁴⁶ [Morgenthau, 1978 #921], 4-15 *passim*.

⁴⁷ Acheson, Dean. “Homage to plain dumb luck” in (Divine 1971), 13.

impeachment, as well as the necessity to avoid Democratic Party defeats in upcoming Congressional elections.⁴⁸

The belief that moral arguments are irrelevant to political decision-makers leads to the further argument that ‘moral norms do not apply to the conduct of States.’⁴⁹

Kenneth Waltz put this succinctly:

Each state pursues its own interests, however defined, in ways it judges best. Force is a means of achieving the external ends of states because there exists no consistent, reliable process of reconciling the conflicts of interest that inevitably arise among similar units in a condition of anarchy. A foreign policy based on this image is neither moral nor immoral, but embodies merely a reasoned response to the world about us ...⁵⁰

This is very close to the Christian Realist position as argued by Reinhold Niebuhr’s in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*:

The selfishness of human communities must be regarded as an inevitability. Where it is inordinate it can be checked only by competing assertions of interest...⁵¹

The objection that, since individuals have moral limits to what they are permitted to do, and the State is merely a collection of individuals; the State therefore *must* be subject to moral limits, is met in one of three ways by political realists. Some argue a version of moral nihilism – there are no moral limits on States because there are no moral limits at all. Alternatively, others argue that, as a result of the anarchy that rules in the relation of States to States, moral requirements must be suspended. Finally, others argue that there is a peculiar alchemy in the formation of States that makes the State more than a mere collection of individuals and therefore allows it to transcend the moral requirements placed on individuals. Christian Realism goes a somewhat different route, arguing that morals *do* play a role in political relations, but they do not have a normative function. They are, rather, one consideration among many.

⁴⁸ (Coady 1991), 373.

⁴⁹ (McMahan 1991), 384.

⁵⁰ (Waltz 1954), 238.

⁵¹ (Niebuhr 1932), 272

Barth's understanding of the role of the State concerning politics comes quite close to political realism. Barmen V states:

Scripture tells us that by divine appointment the state, in this still unredeemed world in which also the church is situated, has the task of maintaining justice and peace so far as human discernment and human ability make this possible, by means of the threat and use of force. The church acknowledges with gratitude and reverence toward God the benefit of this, God's appointment.⁵²

He later wrote:

... it [the State] has no message to deliver; it is dependent on a message being delivered to it. It is not in a position to appeal to the authority and grace of God; it is dependent on this happening elsewhere. It does not pray; it depends on others praying for it. It is blind to the whence ? and whither ? of human existence, its task is rather to provide for the external and provisional delimitation and protection of human life; it depends on the existence of seeing eyes elsewhere. It cannot call the human *hubris* into question fundamentally, and it knows no final defense against the chaos which threatens it from that quarter; in this respect it too depends on ultimate words and insights existing elsewhere.⁵³

Thus, the State exists to maintain "justice and peace... by the use of force" and has no moral function in the world. It exists to protect human life by threat. Moral argument is not a function of the State. It is important to note that Barth does not speak to politics as a mere citizen, nor as a political activist. He writes as a theologian and only from that perspective. He wrote, for example, "The civil community as such is spiritually blind and ignorant. It has neither faith nor hope."⁵⁴ It is however, an instrument of divine grace, albeit in ignorance of that and sometimes in spite of the best efforts of the leaders within the State. The church's task with regard to the State is to pray for it and remind it of its boundaries.

⁵² [Barth, 1934 #895], 150.

⁵³ (Barth 1946), 22-23

⁵⁴ (Barth 1946), 17.

Moral Realism

Moral realism operates under the premise that moral questions have correct answers that are correct because of objective moral facts. These moral facts are determined by circumstances and can be discovered by using moral reasoning. The truth of a moral statement is dependent on a state of affairs independent of the ideas that a person may or may not have concerning that moral statement. In other words, a moral statement may be true even if no one believes it to be so. The *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* defines moral realism as:

The view that moral beliefs and judgments can be true or false, that there exist moral properties to which moral agents are attentive or inattentive, sensitive or insensitive, that moral values are discovered, not willed into existence nor constituted by emotional reactions. Far from being a function of wishes, wants, and desires, moral demands furnish reasons for acting, reasons that take precedence over any other reasons.⁵⁵

This is very close to ethical naturalism which the *Oxford Companion* defines as:

The views that (i) ethical terms are definable in non-ethical, natural terms, (ii) ethical conclusions are derivable from non-ethical premises, (iii) ethical properties are natural properties. A 'natural' term or property is one that can be employed or referred to in natural scientific explanations.⁵⁶

There are two variations of this type of moral reasoning which differ on how they determine the truth of a moral statement: **reductive naturalism** argues that moral predicates mean nothing other than certain non-natural or metaphysical properties that exist apart from the natural, empirical properties of a statement. Alternatively, one may determine truth by means of an **ethical naturalism**, which argues that moral properties are supervenient on natural properties. Robin Lovin uses the example of *poverty*: a reductive naturalist would argue that poverty is evil because of the metaphysical properties of poverty; an ethical naturalist would argue that poverty is evil because it has a negative affect on human well-being. He wrote:

⁵⁵ (Honderich 1995), 596

⁵⁶ (Honderich 1995), 606

It is therefore right to act against situations of poverty and wrong to create or perpetuate them, not because we intuit some non-natural property of rightness or wrongness in those acts, but because the conditions of poverty have the natural properties that they have.⁵⁷

Christian Realism tends to use an ethical naturalist moral realism and would argue that poverty has a negative effect on human beings; one must work towards its elimination. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote:

Every truly moral act seeks to establish what ought to be, because the agent feels obligated to the ideal, though historically unrealized, as being the order of life in its more essential reality. Thus the Christian believes that the ideal of love is real in the will and nature of God, even though he knows of no place in history where the ideal has been realized in its pure form. And it is because it has this reality that he feels the pull of obligation. ... The “pull” or “drive” of moral life is a part of the religious tension of life. Man seeks to realize in history what he conceives to be already the truest reality – that is, its final essence.⁵⁸

Thus the “true reality” is the pull toward moral action and is not merely a natural property of a given situation. This is not to argue, however, that voluntary poverty, such as the vow members Roman Catholic orders vow take, ought to be forbidden. As poverty is rejected because of the effects it has on human well being, if a certain type of poverty has different effects, it need not be rejected. Therefore, a vow of poverty taken with the goal of some sort of spiritual self-realisation is essentially different from inner city poverty as the causes for and effects of the poverty are different. The fact that circumstance plays such a crucial role in moral realism is an important issue for social ethics.

Ethical Naturalism, however, can be broken down still further based on the natural properties and experiences that are considered significant for moral assessment. One finds within this type of moral realism utilitarian (focusing on human happiness and the natural properties that bring about this result for the greatest number of people), eudaimonistic (natural circumstances that maximise the development of valued human characteristics), more socially oriented theories

⁵⁷ (Lovin 1995), 15.

⁵⁸ (Niebuhr 1936), 19.

(focusing on the developments that allow constructive responses to social problems) and natural law forms (which stress human functioning in accordance with an order that can be discerned in nature and progress toward states of affairs that mark the full development of that nature).

Christian Realism shares with the natural law tradition the belief that right action is action that conforms to human nature. A moral person acts in ways that develop the capacities that humans have by nature. Reinhold Niebuhr, in his *Nature and Destiny of Man*, wrote:

Man is a sinner. His sin is defined as rebellion against God. ... Sin is occasioned precisely by the fact that man refuses to admit his "creatureliness" and to acknowledge himself as merely a member of a total unity of life. He pretends to be more than he is.⁵⁹

One must be realistic about the nature of human beings: human beings are limited yet capable of self-transcendence. Again from the *Nature and Destiny of Man*:

To the essential nature of man belong, on the one hand, all his natural endowments, and determinations, his physical and social impulses, his sexual and racial differentiations, in short his character as a creature imbedded in the natural order. On the other hand, his essential nature also includes the freedom of his spirit, his transcendence over natural process and finally his self-transcendence.⁶⁰

The moral person does not settle for less than the human possibilities allow but, at the same time, this person must avoid expectations that exceed a realistic estimate of those possibilities. According to Lovin, the key point is that: "moral and political systems are to be formulated in relation to that realistic assessment of human nature, not imposed on it from some other source."⁶¹

Barth is somewhat ambiguous concerning moral realism. On the one hand, he is a divine-command moralist. Good is that which God commands us in a given situation. As God is free, a person in a given situation may not be commanded to do the same thing as someone else in a similar position. This would seem to be opposed

⁵⁹ (Niebuhr 1941), 16-17.

⁶⁰ (Niebuhr 1941), 286-287.

⁶¹ (Lovin 1995), 16.

to the realistic belief that any moral claim must be based on a realistic knowledge of human capabilities and is opposed to any kind of a metaethical system based solely on God. However, Barth also argues that it is an essential aspect of human nature that it is *created*. To obey God's command is what it is to be human. For Barth, the original sin was the attempt by humans to determine what good and evil is. As early as the first edition of his commentary on Romans, Barth wrote:

There is only one sin: the desire of human beings to be independent *vis-à-vis* God. Out of immediacy of being with God, the man fell ... It was too little for him to simply be God's. He became interesting to himself. He transmitted properties and functions of God to himself. He wanted to be like God: a being unto himself, resting in himself and important for his own sake. ... He became a knower, a superior being. He placed himself next to life, examining it and observing it. He began to analyse it. He received evil, sharp, penetrating, and yet blind eyes. A view of himself, "knowledge of humankind," experience," "psychology," historical" thinking – all of that is only possible outside of God.⁶²

In fact, he says that when the serpent tempted Adam and Eve in the garden to taste the fruit of the tree of knowledge about good and evil, it was the temptation to "do" ethics!⁶³ Human nature is created nature and, therefore, limited nature. Any attempt by human beings to determine good and evil is to overstep the boundary of their real nature. Thus, to obey God's command is to be true to our nature as God's creation and can be brought into accord with a theologically realistic anthropology.

Theological Realism

Theological realism claims that, in a similar way to moral realism's understanding of a statement's validity, theological statements are also true or false on the basis of a reality external to the person or persons making the statement. God exists and has certain, for lack of a better word, "properties" against which our beliefs about God must be measured and which determine whether our beliefs about God are true or false. God exists in Godself and, therefore, any belief we have

⁶² (Barth 1963), 30.

⁶³ (Barth 1956), 448f.

concerning God must be judged by who God is. It is to this that Reinhold Niebuhr is referring to above – the statement that God is love is true because of its relation to a reality external to our thought process. God exists. And, because God is real and is understood as creator of all that is, the unity of purpose that people seek is only to be found in God. As God is real and external to our thoughts about God, no person can claim to know God in a complete way. This claim guards against one of the inherent dangers of realism, which is that it implies a “God’s eye” view of reality, as mentioned above. If there is one real reality against which our beliefs are to be judged, then there can only be one true account of this reality that presents things exactly as they are and not as they are related to any particular observer’s point of view. This danger is especially apparent in *moral realism*, because if there is only one moral reality, then there is a moral claim to impose that morality on all, including those who hold other interests and opinions. Theological realism argues that only God has a God’s eye view, we do not. Because we lack this “God’s eye” point of view, we can only speak of theological truths in terms of *myth*. Since Christianity can only speak of theology in terms of *image* and *symbol*, it is always incomplete and partial. As it is symbol, however, it can encompass a reality larger than our experience and we can use its symbols to order our experience. H. Richard Niebuhr wrote:

What is the general idea in such interpretation of ourselves as symbolic more than as rational animals? It is, I believe, this: that we are far more image-making and image-using creatures than we usually think ourselves to be and, further, that our processes of perception and conception, of organizing and understanding the signs that come to us in our dialogue with the circumambient world, are guided and formed by images in our minds... At all events we reflect on our existence as Christians with this hypothesis in mind we become aware that in Christian life Jesus Christ is a symbolic form with the aid of which men tell each other what life and death, God and man, are like; but even more he is a form which they employ as an a priori, an image, a scheme or pattern in the mind which gives form and meaning to their experience.⁶⁴

Symbols include the coherent facts about the world, but also allows for unknown truths and incoherent elements of our world. It is not coherent as a literal

⁶⁴ (Niebuhr 1963), 151-152, 154.

representation of the known facts, but deals with aspects of the world in which ignorance, uncertainty, and conflict render the facts themselves incoherent. By pointing to the possibility of a resolution beyond the present conflicts, the symbol or image represents a world that is *more* coherent than the world of facts, though the symbol cannot be maintained as a statement of what those facts are. This means that, while acknowledging that theological statements are true or false based on an external reality, theological realists must acknowledge that many of their statements will be found to be false. As Lovin states:

Someone who understands theological language in this way is more concerned with the cognitivist claim of theological realism that theological propositions can be true than with the truth value of specific traditional theological formations.⁶⁵

Truth is therefore understood *pragmatically*, not as *dogmatic orthodoxy*, nor fidelity to scripture, but coherence with all available sources of insight. The theological realist prefers therefore also to speak of “justified beliefs” rather than “universal truths.”

In order for our world to have meaning, it must be coherent. There must be a way in which our experiences are interrelated to each other and to the experiences of others. The liberalism of the 19th century believed that this coherence could be found in rationality; however, World War I shattered that belief. What could then provide coherence and meaning in the world? For theological realists, it was to be found in God and the symbolic understanding of God described above. God is, in the words of H. Richard Niebuhr, the “center of value.” The unity of all things is thus to be found not in any human quality or ideal or goal, but in God. This unity must therefore be understood to be *eschatological*; it can only be brought about by God. We, as image-users strive to have a unity of action based on seeking the universal in all of our apparently disconnected experiences. This, for H. Richard Niebuhr and Christian Realism, provides for a place for apologetics in theology; Barth, on the other hand, rejected all forms of apologetics. For Niebuhr, the symbols we use must be able to explain our experience. He wrote that inadequate images

⁶⁵ (Lovin 1995), 23.

...are unable to make sense out of our history and fate. Though they be applicable within narrow limits when they are subordinate to grander hypothesis, they leave great areas of life unexplained and when they are the ultimate images of the heart they lead to confusion and disaster.⁶⁶

The method we use to interpret reality must therefore be able to interpret all of our experience. Thus the symbols we use to interpret reality are used, modified or rejected on the basis of how well they allow us to interpret our experience. This allows for an apologetic theology based on a pragmatic evaluation of our symbols. This harmony or unity that is sought for human experience is to a certain extent what is also sought by theories of justice, which seek to resolve conflicts without creating further struggles.⁶⁷ George Sabine argues that in Plato's *Republic*:

The theory of the state in the *Republic* culminates in the concept of justice. Justice is the bond which holds a society together, a harmonious union of individuals each of whom has found his [or her] life work. ... It is both a public and private virtue because the highest good both of the state of its members is thereby preserved.⁶⁸

The basis for this claim to justice is found in Plato in the gods.⁶⁹ Theological realism, agrees that the importance of justice for relationships on an individual and group level is to be found in God. It argues God is love and love requires justice. This claim is made on the basis of who God is. Our knowledge of God and God's activity is based on images concerning God's person in the Bible and in history. From this, we learn that God's action toward us is based on love, and that this love requires justice. However, "to speak theologically of 'the will and nature of God' as a reality in which the conflicting impulses and purposes that rend individual lives and human communities are unified, or as a law according to which all persons could live in harmony is not, however, to claim that we can give a complete account of that reality or that we know everything that the law requires."⁷⁰ In other words, this theological realism provides an explanation of *how* moral language is meaningful and *not* a set

⁶⁶ (Niebuhr 1941), 75.

⁶⁷ This is argued in (Barry 1989). Barry argues that justice can best be understood under two headings: justice as reciprocity and justice as equal rights.

⁶⁸ (Sabine 1937), 148.

⁶⁹ See Book VI.

⁷⁰ (Lovin 1995), 22.

of moral claims that are true. To say that love is the law of life and that love requires justice is to provide a “regulative principle” as a means to judge between our proximate morality and provides limits to what “moral” truly is. This ethic is most clearly seen in the teachings of Jesus and in his sacrificial death.

For theological realism, that commitment to pursue justice is based on the belief that God is love and love requires justice. This statement does not provide a formula for achieving the resolution of all conflicts; it does, however, claim that justice and love have a reality beyond our beliefs about what justice and love require. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote:

Statements about God are not simply expressions of emotion or acts of personal commitment. Theological claims have cognitive content. They may be true or false. True statements about God are true because they accurately represent a reality independent of the concepts, theories, and evidence we have pertaining to that reality.⁷¹

Moral requirements have a true reality in God. This belief thus links theological realism to moral realism.

Barth has a great deal in common with theological realism. He also argued that God is a real person, complete in Godself without reference to humanity. He wrote:

When Holy Scripture speaks of God, it does not permit us to let our attention or thoughts wander at random until at this or that level they set up a being which is furnished with utter sovereignty and all other perfections, and which as such is the Lord, the Law-giver, the Judge and Saviour of man and men. When Holy Scripture speaks of God it concentrates our attention and thoughts upon one single point and what is to be known at this point. And what is to be known there is quite simple. It is the God who in the first person singular addressed the patriarchs and Moses, the prophets and later the apostles. It is the God who in this “I” is and has and reveals sovereignty and all other perfections. It is the God who wills to be known and worshipped and revered as such...⁷²

The miracle of revelation for Barth is that God is truly revealed in Jesus Christ yet *not* as an object. God remains subject in God’s revelation of Godself. This is the

⁷¹ (Lovin 1995), 20.

⁷² (Barth 1957), 52.

mystery of what Barth calls the “veiling and unveiling” of God in Jesus Christ. God remains *real* in God’s self and nature, and remains independent of our perception of God, yet makes it possible for us to know who God truly and really is.

Barth clearly and explicitly rejects any claim that God’s moral command to us is a “love your neighbour” ethic or any other general rule of action. God is real, and God’s moral claim on us is also real. Yet, it is only real to us in our concrete situation. God does not speak in universal moral claims. However, Barth does argue that there is a boundary to what God commands us in any situation. Although he does not call it a regulative principle, it functions in a similar way. In the *Church Dogmatics*, he argues that both the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount provide boundaries within which the command of God comes to us.

Concerning the Ten Commandments, Barth wrote:

... [I]n the strict sense the Ten Commandments do not contain any direct command, but only prohibitions or rather delimitations. The holiness of God, and the holiness of human beings conditioned by it means delimitation, separation, setting apart, as befits the divine election and the position of the elect defined by it. In this context even the command with regard to the Sabbath day, as also that concerning the respect due to parents, has the following meaning. A definite sphere is marked out, but not positively and inwardly. No account is given of what must happen within this sphere. Directions to this effect obviously belong to quite a different plane and cannot be discussed in connection with the Ten Commandments and the related legislation. We are simply told what must not in any circumstances take place in this sphere, what can do so only in definite conflict with the divine will and as an absolutely reprehensible action on the part of man.⁷³

Although not as prescriptive as theological realism’s regulative principle, this understanding of the Ten Commandments as “boundary” or as “marking out a specific sphere” functions in a comparable fashion. Similarly to the regulative principles allowed for by theological realism, it does not provide direct commands about how we are to act in specific situation; it regulates what are acceptable *possible* moral commands; and, perhaps most tellingly, it allows for God to remain God and humans to be true to their nature as creatures. As does Christian Realism, it serves to provide a “regulative principle” that is true to human nature and real in itself. Barth,

⁷³ (Barth 1957), 684.

however, fails to develop this point in a consistent way, which makes his ethics in some cases appear to be divine arbitrariness. This has led Barth to be misunderstood by many of his critics. We will discuss this in much greater detail below.

A further difference between Barth and Christian realism lies in the use of symbols and images to interpret reality. Barth rejects any hint of natural theology, that there is a general source for knowledge about God in the world. The only source, according to Barth, for knowledge about God is God's revelation in Jesus Christ. This led him to argue for a divine – command ethics, as a way of avoiding any hint of a general, natural revelation. However, in discussing how one hears the command of God, he does suggest that the will of God is apparent in the events of history:

The will and governance of God are not obvious in current events in themselves, but hidden. We can now see them “in a mirror dimly” (I. Corinthians 13:12). It is this very Scripture that reminds us that God's will and governance are not simply invisible. It says, “we see.” And indeed: we do see current events, the tremendous work and suffering of people in their decisions, undertakings and actions. And so, we also see with open eyes the will and governance of God which is carried out in them. But we see so much in addition that we can not see this if our eyes, before which so much of God's will and governance is shown, are not especially opened to see them. So it is with God's will and governance in current events. One could compare them to large handwriting with individual, powerful letters. We see these letters. They are clearly before us, written in the material of human deeds and experiences, which the radio and newspaper daily and even hourly lay out before us. But we need to know that all of those are not merely some wonderful forms, but indeed are letters. And we must know the alphabet and the language to which these letters belong. We need to read these letters and we need to be able to put them together into the written word. Then we would be able to recognize the will and governance of God, although they are hidden. That is the most important question: can we read?⁷⁴

This is much weaker than Niebuhr and Christian Realism's use of symbol but it does imply a similar understanding of God's activity. Barth, however, failed to develop this in a consistent way, which has led to his being charged with leaving ethical decision making to a kind of intuition.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ (Barth 1985), 311. See also below.

⁷⁵ See, for example, [Gustafson, 1978 #896], 41 and [Hauerwas, 1975 #897], 142, n. 44.

Christian Realism

Now we must turn to how these three types of realism – political, moral and theological – interrelate in Christian realism. As mentioned above, moral realism and theological realism are interrelated by the theory of moral regulative principles, such as that the law of life is love and that love requires justice. These principles are morally real because they have their reality in God. In order to make any kind of moral claim, in order for life to have meaning, one must believe in the final unity of reality. However, Christian Realism is *not* overly optimistic about this, as it learns from political and moral realism. Political realism is inherently suspicious of the motives of all people, and argues that ideals and discussion of morals is not only irrelevant to moral decision making, but also are used to hide base motives of self-interest and acquiring more power. Life involves a conflict of claims against claims – claims made by individuals as well as States and other groups. In order to enforce these claims, we seek power and influence. Political Realism in itself falls into the trap of ignoring religion in public discourse and seeing all natural events in terms of material causes. It is politically cynical, and sees all human aspirations in terms of conflicting interest

This pessimism is however tamed by the belief in the final unity. There will be a final unity, and we *can* approximate this unity in history in Reinhold Niebuhr's words. H. Richard put in somewhat differently when he wrote:

Man's task is not that of building Utopias but that eliminating weeds and tilling the soil so that the kingdom of God can grow. His method is not one of striving for perfection or of acting perfectly, but of clearing the road by repentance and forgiveness. That this approach is valid for societies as well as for individuals... is what I am concerned to emphasize.⁷⁶

This call for social action and hopefulness about human potential is an important difference from Barth's point of view. Barth is much more pessimistic about the possibilities of politics and human potential. Although he later became somewhat more optimistic, he very much emphasised God's "No!" to the world during the

⁷⁶ (Niebuhr 1932), 21.

1920's and 30's. In the second edition of his commentary on Romans, concerning Romans 13:1 Barth wrote:

Let every person be in subjection to the existing ruling powers. Though subjection may assume from time to time many various concrete forms, as an ethical conception it is here purely negative. It means to withdraw and make way; it means to have no resentment, and not to overthrow. Why, then, does not the rebel turn back and become no more a rebel? Simply because the conflict in which he is immersed cannot be represented as a conflict between him and the *existing ruling powers*; it is, rather a conflict of evil with evil.⁷⁷

Moral realism tries to understand persons as they are, both good and evil. It takes from theological realism and experience the belief that all people are sinful. It also takes from experience that humans are capable of doing relatively good things. There is thus a tension between what we are capable of accomplishing and what we cannot accomplish. As human beings, we are capable of self-transcendence, imagining and working toward a better, more moral society. At the same time, we are sinful. Any moral society we bring into being is a proximate moral society. Christians are thus, according to Christian Realism, called to work for better approximations of justice; we are also forced to recognise the sinfulness and limits of humanity.

Christian Realism takes from pragmatism the belief that truth can best be discovered by looking for coherence in as many relevant sources as possible. Robin Lovin explained:

For theological realism, the criterion of truth would be neither dogmatic orthodoxy nor fidelity to scripture, but coherence with *all* available sources of insight.⁷⁸

This is one of the essential differences between Barth and Christian Realism: for Barth, there is no external source for theological knowledge. Knowledge of God is only possible in God's revelation in Jesus Christ as attested to in the Scriptures; we have access to his knowledge only when the Holy Spirit enables us to see it. For Barth, the repudiation of this point led to the German church's support of Nazi

⁷⁷ (Barth 1933), 481-482.

⁷⁸ (Lovin 1995), 45.

Germany and to the declaration of Barmen. Concerning Barmen I and the context in which it was written, Barth stated:

We will conclude with a short historical commentary on the first article of the *Theological Declaration* of the Synod of Barmen on May 31st, 1934. the text is as follows:

Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in the Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God, whom we have to hear, and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

We condemn the false doctrine that the Church can and must recognize as God's revelation other events and powers, forms and truths, apart from and alongside this one Word of God. ...

For when in Barmen Jesus Christ as attested to us in Holy Scripture was designated as the one Word of God whom we have to trust and to obey in life and death; when the doctrine of a source of Christian proclamation different from this one Word of God was repudiated as false doctrine; and when, in the concluding article of the whole *Declaration*, the acknowledgement of this truth and the repudiation of this error were declared to be the indispensable theological foundation of the German Evangelical Church [the Confessing Church] ... if it was taken seriously, contained in itself a purifying of the Church not only from the concretely new point at issue, but from all natural theology.⁷⁹

Because of the pragmatic understanding of coherence, Christian Realists must use as many sources as possible – including sociology, anthropology and history. Not all Christian Realists, to be sure, would agree with Walter Horton when he wrote:

Divine revelation is to the race what education is to the individual; and the Old and New Testaments mark but two stages, already superseded in God's never-ending revelation of new truth.⁸⁰

H. Richard Niebuhr was a little less radical when he wrote:

... the effect of Jesus on men is greater than that of his teaching. He is, it is said, a life and not a purveyor of more or less original ideas about life; Christian life consists in becoming a person through association with him rather than in the acceptance of creeds and laws. The evident truth in this conception lies in its retention of the fundamental personal note in faith. It manages, moreover, keep in view the historical character of the church and the Christian. But despite its pragmatic values a definition of revelation in terms of the person of Jesus is manifestly inadequate. The problems which it

⁷⁹ (Barth 1957), 172, 175.

⁸⁰ (Horton 1934), 86.

raises are insuperable. How can we have personal communion with one who exists only in our memory and in monuments, the books and sentences, which are the body of our memory? How can the letter and the document become a carrier of personal life unless they are part of the expressive body of a now-living spirit. ...

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.⁸¹

The first question for this kind of ethics is therefore how is God disclosing Godself to us in what is happening. In order to understand that, one must look at a variety of sources both within and without the Church. This understanding allows Christian realist understandings to be relevant to all concerned persons, in a way that Barth's theology cannot be. During the Cold War, this would lead to Reinhold Niebuhr accusing Barth of being an amateur dabbling in politics. For Barth there is only one source of knowledge that theology needs: God's revelation in Jesus Christ as attested to us in the Bible. Barth's rejection of natural theology is well known and provides one of the important differences between his theology and ethics and that of the Christian Realists. We will return to this below.

For Barth's divine-command ethics, the first task of Christian ethics is

... to show... what it means for us *that* we are commanded [by God] or, turned around, what it means for our understanding of an issue *that* we are commanded, that the command has come into our human life.⁸²

This understanding of ethics is radically different from the Christian Realists. However, in spite of the differences between Barth's theology and that of the Christian Realists, there are significant areas where they do agree with each other. Neo-orthodoxy and Christian realism both were responses to a crisis of belief in the world in and in theology. In responding to this crisis, both sought to realistically understand the world, in particular human sinfulness in the world while they remained faithful to God who is active in the world. These points account for much of the similarity between the two movements. At the same time, Christian realism and neo-orthodoxy arose in different milieus with different Weltanschauungen.

⁸¹ (Niebuhr 1941), 108, 111.

⁸² (Barth and Braun 1973), 194.

Nonetheless, the similarities are telling, most noticeably the conviction that theology and ethics must be both realistic and idealistic – it must take the world and the possibilities and limitations of human action seriously. It must also maintain the belief that God is active in the world; that God's will will be done in the world. Christian theology must remain both realistic and hopeful. This tension must be maintained in theological-ethical discussions, including any discussion of the ethics of war. The purpose of this work is to discuss war and military conflict in a way that is true to the situation in which such activity takes place and is true to the belief that God is active in human history. The goal is therefore to espouse a hopeful realist ethic of conflict.

Chapter II: Karl Barth

Introduction

Karl Barth is certainly one of the, if not the most influential theologian of the twentieth century. Although Swiss, he became known in Germany with the publication of the second edition of his famous commentary on Romans.⁸³ On the strength of the first edition of this work, he was named a professor at Göttingen in Germany. He remained a professor in Germany at several different universities, until he was forced from his chair in 1935 for his refusal to take an oath of loyalty to Adolf Hitler.⁸⁴ From that time until his retirement in 1962, he taught in Switzerland at the University of Basel.

Barth's ethics have often been neglected, although his theology remains hugely influential. In recent years there has been a reappraisal of his ethical thought⁸⁵ which has reevaluated some interesting aspects of his ethical work. We will be referring to some of these throughout this chapter.

Barth's Theology in Context

Barth's opposition to the National Socialists is well known. The basis for this opposition is clearly attested in Barmen I⁸⁶, as quoted above. Hitler and the National Socialists wanted to be a "second revelation" of God's will for the world and Hitler a political messiah.⁸⁷ Thus, in 1934 Georg Weippert wrote in a book titled *Das Reich als Deutscher Auftrag (The Reich as German Mission)* that "The Reich is not simply the form of order of the German people; rather the Reich is Germany's mission in the

⁸³ (Barth 1933)

⁸⁴ See (Busch 1975), 268f.

⁸⁵ See, for example: (Biggar 1993) and (Webster 1995) for two examples of the renaissance in studies on Barth's ethics.

⁸⁶ See footnote 39.

⁸⁷ Christoph Strohm discusses Dietrich Bonhoeffer's understanding of Nazism as "political messianism." See his excellent (Strohm 1989).

world.”⁸⁸. Karl Dietrich Bracher discussed the tendency in Germany to see Hitler as a messiah in his book, *The German Dictatorship*. He wrote:

Nevertheless, leader worship found a growing response in a democratic, free society, and it proved to be the most effective part of a propaganda which promises not only victory and greatness but also salvation and security. Long before 1933, a wealth of grotesque practises and religious fervour testified to the quasi-religious impact of the Leader propaganda, as, for example, obituaries in which the name of Hitler was invoked in the place of the name of the Lord...

Hitler appeared as the exponent of a new sense of life, fulfilling the need for devotion, service, and subordination, as the one who alone could meet this need and transform it into liberating political deed. He was the incarnation of the ‘national community’; thanks to his intuition and his leadership talent, he was ‘invariably right’; he was the indisputable interpreter of the interests of the ‘people’s community’ whose emanation he claimed to be. Thus he was not bound by any rule of law, not even vis-à-vis his own followers. This sense of mission was greater still than the monarchic sense of legitimacy; even to a Hohenzollern prince like August Wilhelm, Hitler appeared as the ‘leader sent by God’.⁸⁹

Against that, Barth felt no compromise was possible. There can only be one revelation of God and one messiah.

Barth not only rejected National Socialism, he also felt that, once the war against the Nazis finally broke out, that it was commanded by God. In 1941, in a letter to Great Britain, Karl Barth wrote:

[W]e Christians in all lands find ourselves, as far as this war is concerned, in a situation strikingly different from anything that we experienced twenty-five years ago: that is to say, different in so far as we do not just accept this war as a necessary evil, but that we approve it as a righteous war, which God does not simply allow but which God commands us to wage.⁹⁰

A little later in the same letter he wrote:

As soon as some people in responsible positions began to realize that, as far as Adolf Hitler was concerned, what we have to do is simply and solely to defend the Right as such against the Wrong – a matter which did not admit of discussion but demanded the taking up of arms – as soon as they realized this, war broke out.

⁸⁸ Quoted in (Bracher 1970), 316.

⁸⁹ (Bracher 1970), 316 quoting a speech delivered at Brunswick, *Berliner Tageblatt*, 17 June 1931.

⁹⁰ (Barth 1941), 3-4.

Since this is so, we Christians cannot say “No” nor “Yes *and* No” to this war; we can only say “Yes”. We must postpone our objection to war as such to some future date, when it may once have some reality. We must not evade our responsibility for seeing that this war is waged, and waged ardently.⁹¹

This, in essence, shows Barth’s understanding of the Second World War. Nazism is rejected in principle because it attempts to set itself up as a second or further revelation of God’s will for the world. Negotiations were attempted with Nazi Germany and failed because Hitler simply ignored all treaties when they no longer suited his plans. Therefore, war became the sole remaining option for those countries that opposed Nazism and bore some responsibility for Hitler’s rise to power (through the events at the end of World War I). Barth therefore accepted the war as being just and supported the Allies against the Axis. The reason for this is that God commanded it in the concrete situation of the time.

At the same time, that he supported the Allied war effort, he also argued that Switzerland should remain neutral. Barth wrote in December 1939 to Pastor Westphal, a French pastor:

You will not, dear friends, misinterpret the fact that we Swiss form at present an island of “neutrality” from a military point of view. At the moment there is no other possibility. The causes of the present war lie in the international decisions of 1919 in which our country did not take part. And since that date (as before) high politics in Europe have developed without our co-operation.⁹²

For Barth, the command of God to go to war is always a *Grenzfall*, a command of God that reaches us at the border of the area within which God commands us. In the English translation of Barth’s *Ethik* this term is translated as “boundary case” and in the *Church Dogmatics*, it is translated as “exceptional case.” Translating *Grenzfall* as “boundary case” is somewhat closer to the German – Barth means that this command of God only occurs at the boundary of the area within which God commands us and human activity takes place. This “sphere” or “area” is not itself a positive command nor a principle, it is rather the boundary of where God will command us. It does not tell us what we are to do, it rather tells us what we are not under any circumstances commanded to do. The Ten Commands are a delineation of this sort, as Barth stated

⁹¹ (Barth 1941), 8.

⁹² (Barth 1940), 31

in the *Church Dogmatics*, cited above.⁹³ It is thus on the boundary of this sphere that God's command to go to war reaches us. In order to better understand what Barth means by this, we first need to look at his understanding of Christian ethics in general.

Barth and Religion

Barth gave two series of lectures in the nineteen-twenties on Christian dogmatics. The Göttingen Dogmatics were started in Göttingen in 1924 and completed in Münster in 1925 and another series started in Münster in 1926. The Göttingen Dogmatics have been recently translated into English,⁹⁴ although the second series has not yet been translated into English.

In both series of lectures, Barth discussed Schleiermacher extensively when discussing religion. He gives the reason for this in the Göttingen Dogmatics:

I thus refrain from giving my own positive account of the concept of religion and stick with what Schleiermacher understood by it at the climax of the modern development, for without going into details we may assume that the modern concept of religion derives from Schleiermacher...⁹⁵

Both deal with religion as the basis for the possibility of subjective revelation. In both, Barth discusses Schleiermacher when discussing whether religion can provide a basis for the subjective possibility of revelation and both are very close to each other. In Barth's *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, the section concerning Schleiermacher is entitled: "The big mistake (Schleiermacher)," located within the chapter "The Revelation of God," paragraph 18 "Grace and Religion."⁹⁶ Since they are relatively close to each other in content, we will discuss both together.

For Barth, religion was a human endeavour – possibly the best human endeavour only attempted by the noblest people – the "heroes," as it were, but still, it is a human act. Religion is therefore *anthropocentric* – it is an act of human

⁹³ See note 72.

⁹⁴ (Barth and Reiffen 1991)

⁹⁵ (Barth and Reiffen 1991), 182.

⁹⁶ (Barth 1927), 306-315.

consciousness dealing with some aspect of human personality or experience. “Religion” in this form dominated nineteenth century theology and ethics, and it was against this that Barth was working. For Barth, as for others, Schleiermacher was the personification of nineteenth century theology and this understanding of religion. Therefore, we will look at Barth’s understanding of Schleiermacher and nineteenth century theology in order to see how Barth’s theology was *theocentric* in opposition to Schleiermacher’s anthropocentrism. The background for the problem of human knowledge of God is Kant’s understanding of the nature of theoretical knowledge. In his 1922 lecture “The Word of God and the Task of the Ministry,” Barth traced his theological lineage back through Kierkegaard, Luther and Calvin to Paul and Jeremiah – in opposition to Schleiermacher:

With all due respect to the genius shown in his work, I can *not* consider Schleiermacher a good teacher in the realm of theology because, so far as I can see, he is disastrously dim-sighted in regard to the fact that a person as person is not only in *need* but beyond all hope of saving her- or himself; that the whole of so-called religion, and not least the Christian religion, *shares* in this need; and that one can *not* speak of God simply by speaking of humanity in a loud voice... The very names Kierkegaard, Luther, Calvin, Paul and Jeremiah suggest what Schleiermacher never possessed, a clear and direct apprehension of the truth that the person is made to serve *God* and not God to serve the person. The negation and loneliness of the life of Jeremiah in contrast to that of the kings, princes, people, *priests*, and *prophets* of Judah – the keen and unremitting opposition of Paul to *religion* as it was exemplified in Judaism – Luther’s break, not with the impiety, but with the *piety* of the Middle Ages – Kierkegaard’s attack on *Christianity* – all are characteristic of a certain way of speaking of *God* which Schleiermacher never arrived at.⁹⁷

Barth felt that the universe, and our very existence, is best characterised as a question, the very question of being. The answer is an absolutely new event – and here we can see Barth’s dialectic at work – in which

...the impossible becomes *of itself* possible, *death* becomes life, *eternity* time, and *God* becomes human. There is *no* way which leads to this event; there is *no* human faculty for apprehending it; for the way and the faculty are themselves new, being the revelation and faith, the knowing and being known enjoyed by the new person.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ (Barth 1922), 195-197.

⁹⁸ (Barth 1922), 197.

In paragraph 17 section 2, which immediately precedes his discussion of Schleiermacher in *Die christliche Dogmatik*, Barth discusses the criteria that make subjective revelation possible.⁹⁹ He gives four requirements:

1. Humans must remain what they are – “poor, wretched and naked”¹⁰⁰ and wholly dependent on God. We must be true to what we are **not** on the basis of some philosophy, but because that is what we are before God. It cannot be that it becomes possible for us to be “...the happy subject of that experience of receiving revelation”¹⁰¹ because of some experience or act on our side. We only have access to revelation because of the activity of the Holy Spirit.
2. At the same time, God must remain God – “God Godself, Spirit, not just any spirit, but the Holy Spirit, the Creator Spirit.”¹⁰² God cannot be some power present in life or in the grace of existence. That possibility is excluded because it would require that there be continuity between God and humans – which would then, according to Barth, be the negation of any need for revelation. “It must remain absolutely clear that this person – wholly separated from God, strange to God, turned totally away from God, only through God can come to God.”¹⁰³ This God is a wholly other – an “...Other that always must remain other.”¹⁰⁴ The encounter between God and humans must be an encounter “... in which God remains not only quantitatively but also qualitatively wholly superior.”¹⁰⁵
3. In this encounter, humans must act in belief and obedience – it cannot merely be something that happens to us, like a thunderstorm or an earthquake.

This encounter must mean question and answer, speaking and hearing, giving and taking between the person and God; the person must be an actor in this relationship, and not simply a growing branch on the divine tree or a leaf blown about by the divine wind or a drop in the

⁹⁹ (Barth 1927), 291-297.

¹⁰⁰ (Barth 1927), 291.

¹⁰¹ (Barth 1927), 292.

¹⁰² (Barth 1927), 293.

¹⁰³ (Barth 1927) 293.

¹⁰⁴ (Barth 1927), 294.

¹⁰⁵ (Barth 1927), 294.

divine ocean or a stone in the divine avalanche or even a wheel driven by the divine motor.¹⁰⁶

The human encounter with God is a

...demand on the activity of our life.” “Fellowship between God and humans must, in order for the word to have any meaning at all, mean both a turning of humans to God as well as a turning of God to humans, although the turning of humans can only have meaning when based on God’s turning and only in relationship to that turning.¹⁰⁷

4. This relationship between God and humans must remain a free and non-static relationship, which remains constant only in that in every moment one must begin again with the beginning. It can never be understood as given; it must be “new every morning.” It could not be otherwise when we are dealing with the almighty God. It is in God’s grace, God’s decision to be in relation with us, God’s decision to reveal God’s self to us, that the constant of this relationship can be found. This relationship must there remain a struggle for life and death, for being or non-existence.

This discussion of the criteria for the possibility of revelation is central to Barth’s epistemology as well as his understanding of revelation. We will discuss this more below.

Following this, paragraph 18 discusses religion and whether or not the basis for subjective revelation can be found in it. This paragraph is based on the statement:

The reality of religion, based on a possibility of the human soul, exists in the purest form in reverence for a totally other, who the human being believes to be trustworthy of superiority and help on the basis of their experience, yet contrary to the human beings’ self and everything else he or she knows –. This reality as such is not the subjective possibility of the possibility of revelation, but the strongest expression of the contradiction of human beings to God and to themselves. If it is fellowship with God, then not as such, but only through the grace of God, which it accepts as faith and obedience.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ (Barth 1927), 294-295.

¹⁰⁷ (Barth 1927), 295.

¹⁰⁸ (Barth 1927), 301-302.

Religion, or piety, is therefore based on a “possibility in the human soul.” Barth defines religion by quoting Goethe:

In our bosom surges a desire to willingly devote ourselves in gratitude to a higher, purer, unknown, thereby deciphering the eternal unknown. We call it being devout.¹⁰⁹

It is, as such, a *human* possibility. Schleiermacher argued that it is “the feeling of absolute dependence.” Religion is therefore by definition a human feeling, and does not require God. As Barth wrote:

We can easily reduce all these modern trains of theological thought to Descartes’s proof of God, to which Wobbermin and Scholz make explicit appeal. Because the idea of God exists in us, therefore God exists in Godself. The only difference is that the moderns do not speak of an innate idea of God but of an achieved experience of God, and thus substitute ‘so far as’ for ‘because.’¹¹⁰

This means that God is placed under religion, in the realm of human possibility. In fact, God’s very existence becomes dependent on our ability to conceptualise God – with the result that Feuerbach’s argument, namely that God is merely human writ large and therefore, does not exist in Godself, can not be overcome. In this case, theology is no longer theology but “untheology, or antitheology, or atheology”¹¹¹

Barth argues “That the reality of religion and the subjective possibility of revelation are one and the same, that is the teaching of Schleiermacher and the many who, so or so, follow in his footsteps”¹¹² Barth continues by discussing Schleiermacher with reference to the four requirements discussed above for subjective revelation:

1. The first question is whether Schleiermacher understands humans to be “poor, wretched and naked.” Barth argues that Schleiermacher clearly feels that this is not the case. Religion is the crowning of human achievement.

¹⁰⁹ (Barth 1927), 305.

¹¹⁰ (Barth and Reiffen 1991), 48.

¹¹¹ (Barth 1927), 303.

¹¹² (Barth 1927), 306.

Religion is based on a inherent ability within the human soul, although this possibility may only be realised by a few “virtuosos, mediators, priests or heroes of religion...”¹¹³ It is nonetheless a possibility for every person. They must develop this potential, but they do have the ability to do so. In fact, Barth understands Schleiermacher to be arguing that “human existence in self-awareness is one with divine being... For Schleiermacher, the person stands from the beginning and always before God. This person does not need God, in order to be possible before God.”¹¹⁴

2. The next question is whether, for Schleiermacher, God is understood as a person separate from all creation. Barth maintains that Schleiermacher does all he can to prevent this dichotomy between creation and Creator. For Schleiermacher:

The subjective possibility of revelation consists in the fact that... the person attributes divine subjectivity to her- or himself. Or how else should one understand Schleiermacher when he describes in the *Speeches* that decisive moment when humans wed the universe in this way: ‘I lie on the bosom of the infinite world. At this moment I am its soul, for I feel all its powers and its infinite life as my own; at this moment it is my body, for I penetrate its muscles and its limbs as my own, and its innermost nerves move according to my sense and presentiment as my own.’¹¹⁵

Clearly, for Schleiermacher, God is not a separate, wholly other and unique person.

3. Does the relationship between God and human beings require human action – in “belief” and “obedience?” For Schleiermacher that would mean confusing religion with metaphysics and morality. He wrote in the *Speeches*: “Praxis is an art, speculation is a science, religion is the sensibility and taste for the infinite”¹¹⁶ Barth describes Schleiermacher’s *The Christian Faith*:

¹¹³ (Barth 1927), 307-308.

¹¹⁴ (Barth 1927), 307.

¹¹⁵ (Barth 1927), 308-309. Barth is quoting Schleiermacher’s second speech: (Schleiermacher 1920), 47 [74]; English translation: (Schleiermacher 1988), 113.

¹¹⁶ (Schleiermacher 1988), 103. Barth misquotes Schleiermacher here, replacing “Unendliche” “infinite” with “Universum” “universe.” See (Barth 1927), 312.

... in *The Christian Faith* the theory of the feeling of absolute dependence always appears in concerto with a knowledge and activity, but is understood not in this connection, but in its purity as the wholly passive piety, or the subject remains in itself. The relationship to God is beyond the thinking and willing self, with which it does, however, exist in a sort of symbiosis. This relationship is pure, without any qualities, it is only definite in itself, it is being equal with itself and resting in itself.¹¹⁷

Although Christianity is defined as a “teleological religion” – a religion in which all activity is grounded on the coming kingdom of God, religion remains for Schleiermacher a “peace” in which a person understands her- or himself to be beyond the opposites of question and answers. This religion does not require any kind of human acting in belief and obedience.

4. Finally: does Schleiermacher understand our relationship to God as a dialogue or struggle whose constant can only be found in God and not in ourselves, at least when it is viewed from our side? According to Barth, Schleiermacher does not. He argues that religion understands everything in the universe to be the activity of God – this activity is “miracle” in the language of religion. All existence is therefore “miracle.” The whole world is seen to be a gallery of religious viewpoints. Therefore, all different religions are understood to be expressions of this unity of existence – and are to be praised as such:

So, for Schleiermacher, religion, the universe, revelation, the truth, God – or whatever one wants to call it, move together in an enormous waltz above each and everything that is.¹¹⁸

There is no dichotomy between God and the world, between creation and Creator – all exist in unity with each other. This dichotomy is central for Barth:

¹¹⁷ (Barth 1927), 312.

¹¹⁸ (Barth 1927), 314.

The subjective possibility of revelation is based on and consists of this either – or, not its resolution. This is where our paths separate.¹¹⁹

To summarise: Barth rejects anthropocentric religion, which he believes Schleiermacher typifies, because of the argument that religion makes subjective revelation possible. He rejects this because the understanding of humans and human potential required for it is far too optimistic; because God is not “wholly other” and seems to be merely the power that is in all of the universe; because humans do not need to respond to God by acting in faith and obedience; and because there is no life-or-death struggle in the relationship it is merely a “given” characteristic of being.

God's Primary Activity

Barth modified his earlier criticism of religion somewhat when he wrote the *Church Dogmatics*. We will return to this point below but the central characteristic of Christianity remained constant throughout Barth's career. God's revelation is a revelation to humans and as such a religious event. Christianity is therefore a human “religion.” However, and this is the key here, revelation is primary and religion secondary.

‘Experience’ is only a reference to the Original, to God... The Catholic Middle Ages and the Reformation understood this to some extent. It remained for pietism, Schleiermacher, and modern Christianity consciously to read the New Testament kerygma backwards. We must win again the mighty sense of reality in which Paul is one with Plato and the prophets. Christ is the absolutely new from above; the way, the truth, and the life of God among humanity; the Son of Man, in whom humanity becomes aware its immediacy to God.¹²⁰

This “mighty sense of reality” remained present in Barth's theology throughout the remainder of his career, as Bruce McCormack has eloquently argued in his book, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and*

¹¹⁹ (Barth 1927), 315.

¹²⁰ (Barth 1919), 42.

*Development.*¹²¹ McCormack locates this central component to Barth's theology in the time-eternity dialectic. He quotes the preface to the second edition of Barth's commentary on Romans:

What, then, do I mean when I say that a perception of the 'inner dialectic of the matter' in the actual words of the text is a necessary and prime requirement for their understanding and interpretation? ... [I]f I have a system, it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called the 'infinite qualitative difference' between time and eternity, and to my regarding this as possessing negative as well as positive significance: 'God is in heaven and you are on earth.' The relation of this God to this person, the relation of this person to this God, is for me both the theme of the Bible and the essence of philosophy. The philosophers name this crisis of human perception – the Prime Cause."¹²²

This "infinite qualitative distinction" separates humans from God entirely. We cannot bridge this gap, only God can. It is only to God's primary action that we can respond – we cannot initiate any movement towards God. We can only respond to God's movement to us. The source for all our knowledge of God must remain God – it is only through God's revelation of Godself that we have access to knowledge about God. This distinction must be maintained. Barth argued that grounding human knowledge about God in human experience failed to sufficiently recognise the distinction of Creator and creation.

As is the case with Barth's dogmatics, he also based his ethics on his Christology. He wrote:

The problem of 'ethics' is therefore, identical with the problem of 'dogmatics': *Soli Deo gloria*... [A]ll ethical behaviour, even the primary ethic of the broken line, even the worshipper bowed before the merciful God, is no more than a demonstration: the demonstration is, however, necessary and obligatory. There is no such thing as the 'building up' by humans of an adequate ethical life, not even if the quality of their moral behaviour were so sublime that it might be claimed that the will of God had been united with the

¹²¹ (McCormack 1995). McCormack argues very persuasively against the von Balthasar thesis, which held that Barth went through two major changes in his thought: his rejection of the liberal theology of his teachers during the First World War and the further turn to analogy, which entailed the "end-point of his liberation from the shackles of philosophy in order to arrive at a truly independent theology." (1) Against this, McCormack argues that the apparent change in Barth's theology of the thirties is a change of *emphasis* rather than a replacement of one form of thought by another." (13) See the introduction to his book for more information.

¹²² (Barth 1933), 10.

human will, or that the human will had been absorbed into the divine, or that the divine will had been fulfilled in the human will. All human doing or not-doing is simply an occasion or opportunity of pointing to that alone which alone is worthy of being called 'action', namely, the action of God... Pure ethical behaviour depends upon its primal origin, an origin which needs to be protected by a determination on our part to call God God and human human, however much we may be tempted to stray into romanticism¹²³

In 1919, Barth stated the relevance of theocentrism for Christian ethics:

Our theme contains a question which must now be upon the lips of us all: What ought we then to do? It is true that many other questions, great and small, burning questions for which we are badly in need of an answer, are contained in this fundamental question and have not apparently been met by the fundamental Biblical answer we have given. But they merely *seem* not to be answered. We are moved by the truth of Christ: why should we not then be grounded in God? We are grounded in God: why should eternity not then be set in our heart? And *sub specie aeternitatis*, why should we not know what is to be done? We can indeed do only one thing – not many. But it is just that one thing which *we* do not do. What can the Christian in society do but follow attentively what is done by *God*?¹²⁴

This move is even clearer in his *Ethics*, which is a copy of his lecture notes from 1928 and 1930. Barth begins in the first chapter by demonstrating the relationship of ethics to dogmatics (and theology as a whole) and by showing how theology – including dogmatics and ethics, must begin with the prior word of God to humanity. This word has been and is still being spoken to humanity in Jesus Christ. Theology must have God as its sole subject. There cannot be any discussion of humanity as some kind of a second subject or pole, alongside God or even subject to God. God must always be primary, must always be the subject of theology. Barth wrote:

Theology is not the presentation of the reality of the Word of God addressed to persons *and also* the presentation of the reality of the person to whom God's Word is addressed...[T]he person to whom God's Word is directed can never become the theme or subject of theology. The person is not in any sense a second subject of theology which must be approached with a shift of focus.¹²⁵

¹²³ (Barth 1933), 431-432.

¹²⁴ (Barth 1919), 326-327.

¹²⁵ (Barth 1981), 13.

The ethical question must answer the question of what is good. The question of the good is so basic that the first chapters of the Bible deal with it. Barth equates the story of humanity's fall in Genesis with the attempt to determine what is good or evil independently, without God. This is how the serpent tempted Eve, by saying that when she eats of the tree: "...your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."¹²⁶ The serpent is, according to Barth, attempting to lay the foundation for ethics!¹²⁷ However, this refers to a particular kind of ethics: an *anthropocentric* or casuistic ethics, which attempts to discover criteria or moral laws for determining what is good and evil. This is the most basic form of human sin, usurping God's authority by claiming the authority to determine good and evil. God alone, as creator of the universe, can determine what is good and evil.

By 1922, this move to theocentric ethics was complete. In his essay, "The Problem of Ethics Today"¹²⁸ one finds a very clear expression of why Barth made this move, and what this move entails. He begins by setting out the problem of ethics:

The problem of ethics is concerned with human conduct, that is, her or his whole temporal existence. It arises from crisis. Human beings find themselves seeking the inner meaning and law of their conduct, the truth about their existence. For that meaning and law and truth he becomes aware that he is responsible.¹²⁹

Human beings only exist in acting. Therefore, the ethical question of what ought we to do is the question of human existence. For humans it is therefore inescapable. In the nineteenth century, it was felt that this was the easy question – we ought to do what we are doing, as this will obviously bring about the kingdom of God. Barth wrote:

Fundamentally, it was a matter not of asking what to do, as if that were not known, but rather of finding out whether philosophy or theology, Kant or Schleiermacher provided the more illuminating formula for the obvious – for it was obvious that what to do was to further this infinitely imperfect but infinitely perfectible culture...¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Gen. 3:5, NRSV

¹²⁷ (Barth 1956), 448. Nigel Biggar begins his book on Barth's ethics with this text ((Biggar 1993), 7)

¹²⁸ (Barth 1922).

¹²⁹ (Barth 1922), 136.

¹³⁰ (Barth 1922), 145.

The ethical problem was seen, in the nineteenth century, as the “expression and witness of the peculiar greatness and dignity of human beings.”¹³¹ It was an incredibly optimistic time.

After discussing the ethical problem, Barth argues that it is clear today that it is not so simple, but, rather, that it must be seen as a *true* problem: “Surely we divine more clearly the unavoidable and *ultimate* character of the perplexity, embarrassment, and uncertainty under which man is placed by the ethical question.”¹³² Barth maintains that in his present situation (1922), we have seen that even the best of human endeavours seems to be flawed. He discusses what we can desire and can do. Firstly, we can “eat, drink, and sleep, beget and bear children, and live our physical life.” These aspects of our existence should not be left out of consideration – after all, we all have to work at this level and, for some, it comprises all of what they do. The next level is the level of theoretical and applied science. Although it has been said that they serve the kingdom of God, one merely has to look at World War I to see that science is also used to serve absurd ends. Above this level is a further level: the level of moral purposes. These purposes are our own. Perhaps there remains one higher level – the level of religious purposes. We can seek, worship and pray to God. That, however, is still a human desire and a human striving, and humans can only desire things and things are not the spirit.

There is nothing, according to Barth, in the whole range of human possibilities that is capable of realising the “moral objective.” The telos of human action, the final answer to the ethical question, cannot be answered by means of any “thing”; the answer must come from beyond time if it is to be a final answer rather than an answer that leads to further questions. Barth then moves on to try to provide help in answering this question by means of a dialectic method. He wrote:

... that human beings condemn themselves to death by this question about the good, because the only certain answer is that the person is *not* good, and from the viewpoint of the good, cannot exist. But this insight, this all inclusive critical negation under which we and our world exist, this fear of death into which the insight leads the upright conscience, is the narrow way and the straight gate that lead to truth, to the real, to the redeeming answer.¹³³

¹³¹ (Barth 1922), 146.

¹³² (Barth 1922), 144

¹³³ (Barth 1922), 167.

In answering this question, we must first fully recognise the negative situation in which we find ourselves. We must not try to avoid it by rationalising it or by discounting its severity. We must accept this situation entirely. When we do that, God then breaks into our situation:

It is through the inescapable severity of this judgment that we come upon the reality of God. It is this that confirms that the problem of ethics, in that it is put to us, signifies our relationship to God.¹³⁴

For ethics, this dialectic means that the value of any human activity or decision is not based on the inherent goodness or badness of the act, nor on its being in accord with any law – be it divine or natural or from some other source, nor on the goal it sets out to accomplish. Acts are good only insofar as they *witness* to God.

Knowledge of God

The problem of knowledge of God was, for Barth, the epistemological problem of the subject – object relationship in human knowing. Human knowing necessarily involves this relationship, as the human knower is the subject who learns about an external “something” that is the “object” of the human activity. Barth wanted to maintain God’s primacy, or subjectness, in all human experience of God yet allow for humans to have true knowledge of God¹³⁵. This is not new to Barth nor was it ignored by liberal theology; Ingrid Spieckermann traced this problem back to Kant’s critiques and shows how liberal theologians, including Ritschl, dealt with it¹³⁶. To rephrase the question in these terms, then, we must ask how persons can

¹³⁴ (Barth 1922), 168.

¹³⁵ It is interesting that it is here that Barth criticizes the pietists in the second edition of his commentary to the Romans. Eberhard Busch wrote: “There is a definite criticism of pietism in the second *Romans*. ... Barth sees the pietists together with the ascetics; and one could see that which he likes about the pietists as the *ascetic line* in pietism: namely, the move in it in which there is a knowledge of God’s ‘No’, of human sinfulness and the necessary fear of God and repentance in the light of it, of the disruption of all identification of human with the divine. Here is where Barth criticizes it. His criticism is not against the fact that pietism also knows about a ‘Yes’ of God, about God’s love, about the new person, indeed about the unity of God and humans. Rather he criticizes that pietism misunderstands and misuses the ascetic negative knowledge as a “way” to come to the divine love and to the new human and, therefore, makes the divine apprehendable by humans.” (Busch 1978), 105.

¹³⁶ See (Spieckermann 1985), 14-17.

have knowledge of God such that God remains subject at all times and never becomes an object. As knowledge of God must be of a different type than human knowledge of other things, Barth argued that knowledge of God can only come by revelation. This argument comes, according to Barth, only *a posteriori*:

... one can seriously raise and treat the problem of the possibility of revelation only when we know its *reality*; one can construct it only a posteriori. All reflection on how God *can* reveal Godself is in reality only a 'thinking after' of the fact that God *has* revealed Godself.¹³⁷

In order to maintain that "infinite qualitative distinction between God and humankind" that is vital for Barth, we can only discuss the *possibility* of God's revelation *a posteriori* – after the fact of revelation. We "know" something of God, the question is how do we know it. Spieckermann argues:

The prerequisite for preaching of the objective knowability of God in light of God's irreducible subjectivity, God's pure I-being, is not merely a speculative norm, it is rather the *a posteriori* prolegomenal perception of God's unavailable actuality in the fact of *revelation*, in which the knowledge of God exists only from God. The *Deus dixit*, which completely takes the person over, was just the starting point of God's addressing him or her. This address brings the person into relation with God; it is the given prerequisite behind which we can have no knowledge ...¹³⁸

God must remain the eternal subject and never be allowed to be an object, which would be the case were we able to discuss the possibility of God's revelation prior to the fact of this revelation. It is only as a result of God's revelation that one can discuss the possibility of God's revelation. For this distinction between God and God's creation to be maintained, revelation must be in hiddenness or, as Barth stated it, "The divine incognito must be total."¹³⁹ The possibility of revelation must lie with God and not with humans. It is therefore in Jesus of Nazareth, truly human in all ways, that God veils and unveils Godself. Gotthard Oblau stated:

As Jesus Christ is the subject of the history of reconciliation, he is also the subject of its revelation. If he becomes in the revelation its object, it is only

¹³⁷ (Barth and Reiffen 1991), 151.

¹³⁸ (Spieckermann 1985), 150.

¹³⁹ (Barth and Reiffen 1991), 138

because and in so far as he makes himself that object. Barth secures the unity of the subject in reconciliation and in its revelation in the teaching of Jesus' office: next to the *munus sacerdotale* (Jesus as the Son of God, as High Priest) and the *munus regium* (Jesus as the Son of humanity, as King), he also knows the *munus propheticum* (Jesus as prophet, guarantor the reconciliation, as his own revelator).¹⁴⁰

Revelation is indirect as it is through a human intermediary. Jesus Christ is the veiling and unveiling of God and, therefore, the objective possibility of revelation:

Christology, set face to face with the fact of Jesus Christ, is an effort to understand that the objective possibility of God's revelation is the 'irremovable mystery' of God in God's indirect communication, but the mystery of God which has entered time and history, which has become palpable and actual, in God's encounter with us by virtue of the incarnation... This *man, this man* [Jesus Christ] (we must emphasize both), is God Godself who reveals God Godself, who by God Godself is revealed as God Godself. He is God who is not just there but also here, who is not just at the beginning and end but also in the middle, who is not just with Godself but also with us in the world. He is living proof of the fact that God is not unfruitful and the world is not forsaken by God.¹⁴¹

Barth found the solution to the problem of knowledge of God in the classic Reformed Christological doctrine of the anhypostatic – enhypostatic incarnation. He discovered this doctrine in the spring of 1924 in Heinrich Heppes' *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*¹⁴², while preparing for his lectures in dogmatics at Göttingen.¹⁴³ Barth summarized this Christology by referring to Maresius:

We find the clearest summary of this Reformed doctrine of the relation between the Logos and flesh in the statement of Maresius that the Logos so unites the human nature to himself that he totally indwells it and yet is totally transcendent and infinite outside it.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ (Oblau 1988), 239.

¹⁴¹ (Barth and Reiffen 1991), 152-153

¹⁴² (Heppes 1950)

¹⁴³ These lectures were published in two volumes as: (Barth 1985, 1990). ET: (Barth and Reiffen 1991)

¹⁴⁴ (Barth and Reiffen 1991), 159

This doctrine was formulated in order to preserve Jesus' true humanity and true divinity. The humanity of Jesus is truly human, as we are but without sin, yet did not exist of itself without the Logos, thereby avoiding any accusations of adoptionism. The divine Logos, however, existed from eternity as divine and infinite. The infinitude of the Logos can not be predicated of the human nature: "If the human nature is no longer finite, then it is no longer human nature."¹⁴⁵ This is opposed by the Lutheran view of the *communicatio idiomatum* which argues that whatever can be predicated of the divine nature can be predicated of Jesus Christ, including the human nature. Therefore, wherever the Logos is, there also is the human nature of Jesus. The Lutherans termed this idea of the infinite Logos being wholly present in Jesus and at the same time in infinitude wholly outside Jesus the *extra calvinisticum*. Thus, although the infinite is capable of assuming the finite, the finite is not capable of assuming the infinite. Bruce McCormack summarizes this development in Barth's thinking:

In May 1924 Barth made a momentous discovery. During the course of his first lectures in dogmatics, he came upon the anhypostatic-enhypostatic Christological dogma of the ancient Church in a textbook of post-Reformation theology. He saw in it an understanding of the incarnate being of the Mediator which preserved that infinite qualitative distinction between God and humankind which had been at the forefront of his concerns... The central thrust of the ancient dogma was that the Logos (the second Person of the Holy Trinity) took to Himself human flesh (i.e. a human "nature", complete, whole and entire) and lived a human life in and through it. The proximity to Barth's dialectic of veiling and unveiling was obvious. In that God takes to God's Self a human nature. God veils God's Self in a creaturely medium. He enters 'the divine incognito' – a situation of unrecognizability. Outwardly (and inwardly!), He is a human being like any other. But the Subject of this human life – we may liken this to Kant's conception of an unintuitable, noumenal self – was at every point the Second Person of the Trinity; a Subject who, because of the veil of human flesh remains unintuitable. Because of His unintuitability, God can only be known in Jesus where He condescends to grant faith to the would-be human knower; where He unveils Himself in and through the veil of human flesh.¹⁴⁶

This discovery remained central to Barth's thinking, although it was modified when Barth modified his understanding of election. At this point, the emphasis was on the

¹⁴⁵ (Barth and Reiffen 1991), 158-159.

¹⁴⁶ (McCormack 1995), 328.

occurrence of revelation here and now on the basis of God's revelation in Christ. As McCormack argues, Barth's theology at this point is grounded in his Christology, but his theology is largely pneumatocentric.¹⁴⁷ In the Göttingen Dogmatics, he argues that it is the Holy Spirit who grants us the ability to see the divine in the human Jesus of Nazareth.

This discovery was of major importance for Barth, in that it allowed a place for historical studies into the life of Jesus and into the Bible. The Logos, the one Word of God, is veiled and unveiled in human flesh, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The question of the subjective possibility of faith then must be answered. How do we have access to this revelation, where God is both the revealer and that which is revealed? For Barth, we have no inherent ability to see this revelation, in the same way we have no ability to see God directly. The question is how we humans, who are utterly incapable of standing before God, then stand before God? Barth answered this question by referring to the Holy Spirit:

The person who stands before God, we must now say, is precisely the person who can *not* stand before God... This person stands before God because God's revelation is not only a there but a here, it is not only objective but also subjective, because God not only reveals Godself in the *Son* but reveals Godself in the Son by the *Spirit*.¹⁴⁸

As discussed above, here are four main strands that are crucial to properly understand the subjective possibility of revelation. Barth summarized these criteria:

Thus the condition of this possibility, formally distinguished under four heads, may be summed up as follows: (a) Unequivocal humanity as one side of the relation; (b) the sure, distinguishable, personal presence of God Godself on the other side; (c) human activity or action in its own sphere; (d) indestructible flexibility in the realization of the relation.¹⁴⁹

In these conditions, we can see the realistic basis of Barth's theology. Humans must be understood as they actually are, God must be understood as God actually is.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ See (McCormack 1995), 328.

¹⁴⁸ (Barth and Reiffen 1991), 175-176.

¹⁴⁹ (Barth and Reiffen 1991), 181.

¹⁵⁰ It is important to note that Barth acknowledges the circularity of his argument here. Any discussion of the possibility of God's revelation of Godself must be *a posteriori* to the fact of God's revelation.

From these two points follow the two final points: humans act within their sphere and the relationship to God must be free and not mechanical, as the relationship can only occur on the basis of God's veiling and unveiling of Godself in Jesus Christ and God is free. Above we discussed how religion, understood on the basis of Schleiermacher, failed to fulfill these criteria. We now turn to how Barth sought to do so in the *Göttingen Dogmatics*.

For Barth, our ability to hear God's revelation is based solely on the Holy Spirit, who enables us to *hear* God's word *willingly*:

Thus the miracle of the Holy Spirit is first of all that at the very point where the humanity of revelation cannot be evaded but is experienced in all its offensiveness, its divinity speaks imperiously to us and is willingly heard by us... In other words, the second miracle of the Holy Spirit is that cheek by jowl we again have the human side, that of a person with her or his religion, with her or his watching and praying [see Mark 14:38], and we also have the divine side. God hearing and seeing God's own voice and deed in this human stammering and stumbling (which is certainly never worse than when in addition to all else it is also devout), God recognising God's own work in these human marvels and weaknesses...¹⁵¹

The first miracle of the Holy Spirit is therefore that God speaks and we hear; the second is that God sees God's own actions in our activity, in spite of our weakness. Revelation must be understood, as discussed above, dialectically. This means God wills to be in relationship and therefore meets us, but this grace is also judgement as it shows what it means to be human. God speaks to us, but that speaking is a command that cuts us to the heart. This is what is meant by the classic reformed understanding of faith *and* obedience. We put ourselves under grace but at the same time, under judgment. Being confronted by God's revelation could lead us to despair because of our weakness which, in turn, could destroy us. That this does not occur is the third miracle of the Holy Spirit:

A third aspect of the miracle of the Holy Spirit, then, is that we are not torn asunder by the Word that leads us to the heights and to the depths, that we are not plunged into despair by it, that we are upheld and carried and led in both

The discussion therefore presupposes the fact of the revelation. This is clearly seen in both Barth's ethics and in his dogmatics.

¹⁵¹ (Barth and Reiffen 1991), 193-194.

cases because it is the Word of God, because God does not deceive us but also will not let Godself be mocked [see Gal. 6:7], by either a belief that is not ready to be obedience or by a zeal for God's kingdom that wants to be without faith.¹⁵²

This leads to the question of what faith is. Faith is understood as *fiducia cordis*, the faith of the heart. Barth emphasized that it is the emotional experience with which God's word must be grasped. Faith cannot be understood as a matter of human understanding, rather it is irrational; it is the heart's venture of trusting in God's promise. It is, again, only by a miracle of the Holy Spirit that we can have faith, and then we must have faith:

...[faith] never ceases to be what it always is, a psychological impossibility, just as revelation is a historical impossibility. It may be conceived – no, it may be asserted and described only as a miracle of the Holy Spirit (the same thing again seen from the other side) that forces us to do what we cannot do, that is, to believe in God, not because we have access to God but because he, the Holy Spirit, is himself God and creates access where there is *none*.¹⁵³

Although faith is not itself rational, it carries with itself a rational demand, that we be obedient to God's command. As creatures, we are confronted by positive and negative demands from our Creator. To trust God means to accept God's demand with fear and trembling. It is only by a miracle of the Holy Spirit that we can maintain childlike trust in God while fearing the command of God. Therefore, the subjective possibility of revelation is the Holy Spirit for it is only in the Spirit that revelation is possible.

The problem remains of how humans can speak of God, as speaking of something again makes us the subject to the object about which we speak. This is, for Barth, the mystery of revelation. God reveals Godself in such a way that we can speak about God objectively, although our speaking is only secondarily knowledge of God and is therefore subject to criticism and correction. At the same time, it must be maintained that:

¹⁵² (Barth and Reiffen 1991), 195.

¹⁵³ (Barth and Reiffen 1991), 197.

In God's revelation in which God distinguishes Godself from all gods and idols, God is and exists only as subject. God's revelation consists precisely of God's decisive refusal to become a He or She or an It, an object...¹⁵⁴

Therefore, the knowledge of God about which we preach and speak is indirect, not direct, as direct knowledge of God would compromise God's being as the eternal subject.

Barth summarised his early view on this in the *Göttingen Dogmatics*:

Let us recall the conditions under which revelation is factual. When God truly reveals Godself truly to us, this presupposes... (a) that God meets us and (b) that we stand before God. For our problem this means that God is an object of our knowledge and we the subject. God is an object of knowledge and we the subject. God becomes an object of knowledge by becoming human in Christ. We become the subject of knowledge by faith and obedience. Concretely and objectively something is there and takes place in human space and time – the humanity of Jesus Christ. Just as concretely and objectively we on the other side know and do something – our faith and obedience. The one thing in this twofold event is revelation. This twofold event is the condition under which God's Word is spoken and his covenant is concluded with us. Under this condition, in this simple subject-object relation, God is knowable by us. To deny that God accepts this condition and enters into this relation in which God is knowable would again be to deny revelation. This *is* revelation – what else could it be? God does not set aside or reverse God's irremovable and irreversible I. He does not cease to be God in God's revelation. But God conceals God's I in a relation in which we can share in God's self-knowledge, in which God can meet us, in which we can stand before God. God conceals God's I in a human It or He or She. God conceals Godself in a human seeing, hearing, touching and tasting of this objective reality [see I John 1.1].¹⁵⁵

This experience of the veiling and unveiling of God is only possible in the Spirit, but it *is* possible. Because of the grace of God, revealing Godself in human experience, in history in Jesus Christ, we can know God. Although this knowledge of God is not direct, it is only because of God's veiling that we can have indirect knowledge; in this veiling we do know God. This knowing is only possible because the Spirit makes it so, we must not allow the mistake of seeing Jesus Christ as the revelation of God, as if to merely look at Jesus Christ is to look at God. It is a veiling and unveiling only

¹⁵⁴ (Barth and Reiffen 1991), 327.

¹⁵⁵ (Barth and Reiffen 1991), 330.

when the Spirit enables us to see it as such. In a parallel way to how the incarnation does not entail the divinization of the human, there also is no divinization of the object which is the medium of divine revelation, it remains a mundane object like any other. Barth wrote:

...God's revelation in any case means God's revelation in God's *concealment*, as the radical dedivinization of the world and nature and history, the complete divine *incognito*...¹⁵⁶

God must remain God and not be exchanged for any objective reality which would then become an idol. It is important also to note that Barth is writing at this point a more Pneumocentric theology rather than Christocentric; he does not explicitly limit God's revelation to us, as enabled by the Holy Spirit, to Jesus Christ. He also does not explicitly allow for revelation to occur outside of Jesus Christ, although he does mention the possibility:

Let us assume that the possibility becomes a reality, that the ability [to know God by the Spirit] is put into practice, that we stand before the mystery, and that the mystery becomes a pointer to God. No matter how or where or when this might happen, we must say that we stand in the relation of revelation, that God's Word is spoken to us and received by us, that the Holy spirit is working in us. No matter how or where or when, I say... we have to ask whether we are bold enough to state that the human possibility for knowledge of God can become a reality only by the path of Christian proclamation. If we are not bold enough to say this, if even hypothetically we think that the step from possibility to reality might be taken on paths that God alone knows, then we must be serious and say that if this is revelation, then it is the one revelation; if this is real knowledge of God, then it is full knowledge of God – for neither real revelation nor real knowledge of God can be quantified – and we have to agree with Zwingli's view that Socrates, Cato, Seneca, and other enlightened pagans saw the day of Christ from afar like Abraham and the other prophets, and in faith partake of full salvation. Let it be understood, *I* am not proclaiming this doctrine, nor indeed the opposite that there is no salvation outside the visible church.¹⁵⁷

Barth is neither arguing for or against the position, he is merely allowing for the possibility. This possibility has two components: that those outside the church have knowledge of God by divine revelation and that God can be active outside of God's

¹⁵⁶ (Barth and Reiffen 1991), 144.

¹⁵⁷ (Barth and Reiffen 1991), 342-343.

activity within the Christian tradition. If Zwingli was right, and Socrates witnessed God's revelation from afar and Christians therefore ought to study him to learn about God's action in the world, then God is active not only in Socrates' learning of the world, but also in our learning from Socrates. The freedom of God to veil and unveil Godself is therefore not limited to God's activity in Jesus Christ. Barth would later modify this when he moved to a more Christocentric theology in the development of his understanding of election in the *Church Dogmatics*, but for the purposes of the argument here, Barth's more spirit centred theology of the *Göttingen Dogmatics* is of greater concern.

Barth's Divine-Command Ethics

Ethics attempts to answer the question of what we ought to do. By definition, that which we ought to do is the *good*. For Barth, however, we are incapable of determining the good. Any attempt by humans to determine the good is sinful; in fact, this attempt brought about the fall, as the serpent in the garden stated: "God knows when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, *knowing good and evil*." (Genesis 3:5, NRSV) Barth wrote in the *Church Dogmatics* concerning this verse:

We have seen that in its root and origin sin is the arrogance in which man wants to be his own and his neighbour's judge. According to Genesis 3:5 the temptation which involves man's disobedience to God's commandment *is the evil desire to know what is good and evil*. He ought to leave this knowledge to God, to see his freedom in his ability to adhere to God's decisions in his own decisions.¹⁵⁸

He went even further in the same volume when he wrote:

There is a definite content to the promise: *Eritis sicut Deus*, and to the concealed invitation to a human being to become the master of her or his own destiny. What the serpent has in mind is the establishment of ethics."¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ (Barth 1956), 231.

¹⁵⁹ (Barth 1956), 448.

Is there, then, a proper function for ethics, or are all attempts at ethics the human attempt to “become the master of his or her own destiny?” If there is a proper form of ethics, what is it and how does it function?

Ethics cannot be the human attempt to determine good and evil, as this would involve humanity arrogantly usurping of God’s authority. Barth remained true throughout his career to what he wrote in his commentary on Romans:

The problem of ethics is identical with the problem of dogmatics: *Soli Deo gloria!*... [A]ll ethical behaviour, even the primary ethic of the broken line, even the worshipper bowed before the merciful God, is no more than a demonstration: the demonstration is, however, necessary and obligatory. There is no such thing as the ‘building up’ by human beings of an adequate ethical life, not even if the quality of their moral behaviour were so sublime that it might be claimed that the will of God had been united with the human will, or that the human will had been absorbed into the divine, or that the divine will had been fulfilled in the human will. All human doing or not-doing is simply an occasion or opportunity of pointing to that alone which alone is worthy of being called ‘action’, namely, the action of God... Pure ethical behaviour depends upon its primal origin, an origin which needs to be protected by a determination on our part to call God God and human human, however much we may be tempted to stray into romanticism.¹⁶⁰

Understanding ethics in this way requires a radical reinterpretation of the ethical task. The proper task of ethics can *not* be the attempt to answer the question of what we ought to do by means of any human determination of good and evil. For Christian ethics, any morality must be based solely on God’s determination of good and evil. Therefore, ethics, as is also true with dogmatics, must begin with God’s word spoken to humanity and *not* with any aspect of an individual person or a group characteristic. God must remain the primary, initiating actor in dogmatics and ethics, indeed in all theology. Humans can only *respond* to God’s command. Theology and ethics must have God as its sole subject. There cannot be any discussion of humanity as some kind of a second subject or pole, alongside God or even as a kind of secondary subject to God. God must always be primary, must always be the subject of theology. Barth wrote:

¹⁶⁰ (Barth 1933), 431-432.

Theology is not the presentation of the reality of the Word of God addressed to the human being *and also* the presentation of the reality of the human being to whom the God's Word is addressed... But the person to whom the God's Word is directed can never become the theme or the subject of theology. The person is not in any sense a second subject of theology which must be approached with a shift of focus.¹⁶¹

This excludes many traditional methodologies in Christian ethics. Notably, it excludes any methodology that understands ethics by means of a divine "principle" given by means of natural law or revelation.¹⁶² Many people have based their ethics in this way on biblical commands, such as Jesus' answer to the question of which is the greatest commandment – "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"¹⁶³ Barth rejects understanding the commands as "guiding principles" in ethics as it still is the attempt by humans to determine good and evil. Any such ethic is, according to Barth, an expression of human sinfulness, as it is casuistic and anthropocentric.¹⁶⁴ There are three main reasons to reject it:

1. In this kind of ethics, the person, by claiming to know what is good and evil, places her- or himself "on God's throne." This occurs in the first place in that she or he, alone or in community, claims to know and be able to summarise God's command, be it from natural, biblical or traditional sources. It occurs in the second place when she or he claims to know a human action, their own or someone else's, so well, that they can judge whether God sees that act as good or evil.
2. A casuistic ethic turns God's command into a general rule or formula, which we must give meaning to by our actions. In itself, the command is

¹⁶¹ (Barth 1981), 13.

¹⁶² For an example of this kind of ethics, (Ramsey 1968)

¹⁶³ Mark 12:29-31 NRSV

¹⁶⁴ There is some debate as to whether this is casuistic, or whether Barth has in fact misunderstood casuistic ethics. See for example, Nigel Biggar's discussion of Barth's understanding of casuistry in (Biggar 1993), especially the chapter "Ethics as an Aid to Hearing." For a modern Christian casuistic ethics, see (Miller 1996).

meaningless. The command must be put to use *by us* in a situation for the command to have any meaning. God's command, on the other hand

... leaves nothing to human choice or preference. It thus requires no interpretation to come into force. To the last and smallest detail it is self-interpreted, and in this form it confronts man as a command already in force.¹⁶⁵

3. A casuistic ethic destroys Christian freedom. We are free, by God's grace, to serve God by obeying God's commands. God commands us, choosing to be in a personal relationship to us. In obeying that command, a Christian is free to offer him- or herself to God. A casuistic ethic puts a law between God and humanity, thus destroying this freedom and, in putting this law between God and us, it denies God's freedom to choose to be in relationship to us.¹⁶⁶

Individuals must accept God's decision concerning good and evil and not desire the authority to do so for themselves. The person who does this

... is therefore then a free human being, when he or she thinks and decides and acts at peace with God, when his or her decision is simply and exclusively a repetition of the divine decision. If that is not enough, if he or she wants to make a primary decision where the decision of God and therefore the divine knowledge of good and evil has already preceded him, this involves a foolish over-estimation of him- or herself, as though he or she is the one who can stand over that alternative and exercise the function of an Atlas bearing and holding together the great building of the universe.¹⁶⁷

Therefore, source for the Christian answer to the ethical question is God's Word to humanity. Barth wrote:

The task of theological ethics is to understand the Word of God as the command of God. Its fundamental, simplest and comprehensive answer to the ethical problem is that human action is good insofar as it is sanctified by the Word of God which as such is also the command of God.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ (Barth 1961), 12.

¹⁶⁶ It is interesting to note that Barth mentions God's freedom only secondarily as a reason for rejecting casuistic ethics. God's freedom is, according to Nigel Biggar, one of the main reasons for Barth's rejection of human control of the good. See (Biggar 1993), 10f.

¹⁶⁷ (Barth 1956), 449-450.

¹⁶⁸ (Barth 1961), 4.

Thus, humans ought to do what God commands them to do. That is the *good*. The question is not what ought we to do, but what is God commanding us to and what it means *that* God commands us.

Hearing the Command of God

Ethics, as discussed above, cannot tell us what the command of God is in a given situation. It rather asks what it means to us *that* God commands us. Barth wrote:

We do not have to show what is commanded us. In this regard no ethics can intervene between God and humans. We have to show rather what the fact that we are commanded means, or, conversely, what it means for the fact that we are commanded that the command is given within our human life.¹⁶⁹

There is then one command that reaches each and every one of us in our concrete situation. This command cannot be stated as a universal truth – that is not the task of ethics, nor is it possible. Nor can ethics attempt to judge other’s ethical decisions. It does have the obligation to ask questions of any ethical decision in order to understand a person’s reasons for making this decision, and to help clarify what the chosen option actually is and means. The question then is: how do we hear the command of God in “our own here and now?” What role does this “here and now” play in our hearing of the command? The command of God is not the same for all times, as Barth wrote in a letter to an American Churchman in 1942: “The Word of God for tomorrow will certainly not simply be a repetition of that which we today, conscientiously and to the best of our knowledge, believe we are hearing.”¹⁷⁰ According to Barth, we need to learn how to see the will and providence of God in the world around us. In a lecture given in July 1944, he said:

¹⁶⁹ (Barth 1981), 118.

¹⁷⁰ (Barth 1942), 293.

The will and governance of God are not obvious in current events in themselves, but hidden. We can now see them “in a mirror dimly” (I. Corinthians 13:12). It is this very Scripture that reminds us that God’s will and governance are not simply invisible. It says, “we see.” And indeed: we do see current events, the tremendous work and suffering of people in their decisions, undertakings and actions. And so, we also see with open eyes the will and governance of God which is carried out in them. But we see so much in addition that we cannot see this if our eyes, before which so much of God’s will and governance is shown, are not especially opened to see them. So it is with God’s will and governance in current events. One could compare them to large handwriting with individual, powerful letters. We see these letters. They are clearly before us, written in the material of human deeds and experiences, which the radio and newspaper daily and even hourly lay out before us. But we need to know that all of those are not merely some wonderful forms, but indeed are letters. And we must know the alphabet and the language to which these letters belong. We need to read these letters and we need to be able to put them together into the written word. Then we would be able to recognise the will and governance of God, although they are hidden. That is the most important question: can we read?¹⁷¹

There are three temptations that affect persons in this regard. The human in current events can bring us to ignore current events in order to be alone with God, as if what is happening in the world is not relevant to us. This may be termed as the mystic temptation in that one believes that they must get away from the world and all distractions to commune with God. However, if we ignore the human events around us, we will also fail to see the divine handwriting and “...in our, so to speak, stolen quiet and solitude it would be difficult to have God as our companion.”¹⁷² The second temptation, which we shall term the atheistic, is to believe that, because we see only human actions in the world, and those seem to become more and more tragic, there is no God governing the world. God may exist, but it is atheistic in that God is in no way active in the world. The third and most serious temptation is to turn the human, or some human element, such as race or nationality, into God because we cannot see God in current events. We will call this the anthropocentric temptation, as it deifies the human at the expense of God. It is wrong because none of these idols can govern the world. We fall into this temptation when we

... stop at the wonderful forms of the human in current events and look at them in themselves, as if there are no letters, as if in the coherence of these

¹⁷¹ (Barth 1944), 311.

¹⁷² (Barth 1944), 312.

forms there are no words to look for and decipher, no language to understand.¹⁷³

The events in themselves are not sacred and are not decisive for ethical decision-making. What is decisive is the command of God that can be “read” in these current events but is not the same as the events themselves. According to Barth:

Outside of the Christian congregation, there are only these three possibilities: either the apathetic indifference or the denial of God or the worship of false gods.¹⁷⁴

These are thus the temptations the church has to avoid in its understanding of current events. The Church must therefore pay close attention to current affairs in the world in order to recognise the “will and governance of God.”

Killing and the Command of God the Creator

Recent history has clarified our understanding of the nature of war. Previously, it was felt that war was the affair of a few members of any given society – the rulers and professional soldiers and possibly their families. However, in modern times the nature of war has become much clearer. Barth wrote:

To-day, however, the increasing scientific objectivity of military killing, the development, appalling effectiveness and dreadful nature of the methods, instruments and machines employed, and the extension of the conflict to the civilian population, have made it quite clear that war does in fact mean no more and no less than killing, with neither glory, dignity nor chivalry, with neither restraint nor consideration in any respect. The glory of the so-called military profession, which has incidentally become the profession of everybody either directly or indirectly, can now feed only on the relics of ancient illusions long since stripped of their substance. Much is already gained if only we do at last soberly admit that, whatever may be the purpose or possible justice of a war, it now means that, without disguise or shame, not only individuals or even armies, but whole nations as such, are out to destroy one another by every possible means. It only needed the atom and hydrogen bomb to complete the self-disclosure of war in this regard.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ (Barth 1944), 312.

¹⁷⁴ (Barth 1944), 312.

¹⁷⁵ (Barth 1961), 453. It is important to note that Barth later regretted the absence of any *jus in bello* in his discussion of war in the *Church Dogmatics*. See „Die These 5 der Barmer Erklärung und das

There are two things to be noted in this passage. The first is to note that war is defined in terms of *killing* (as opposed to murder), the lawful taking of life. . The proper place therefore to discuss the ethics of war is the understanding of the command of God the Creator, the giver of life. Killing is the taking of life as commanded by God; murder is the wilful taking of life without the command of God. This distinction is crucial for Barth. The sixth commandment (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17) clearly prohibits murder. Clearly, within the Old Testament, killing is not prohibited. Capital punishment is commanded within the Ten Commandments as well. The prohibitions in the New Testament (notably Matthew 5 and I John 3) refer to murder and not killing. Barth refers to the story of Ananias and Saphira in Acts 5 to show that killing is not prohibited in the New Testament. Romans 13:1-7 clearly allows that the State has the right to use the sword. This is more clearly shown in the account of Jesus before Pilate in John 19:10-11: “Pilate therefore said to him, “Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?” Jesus answered him, “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above...” The power to use the sword is therefore given by God to the State. Therefore, both the Old and New Testament prohibitions against the taking of life refer to *murder* and not *killing*. The second point to note is that Barth understands war in this way as a result of its occurrence in history, the circumstance of war. Barth learned from the historical appearance of war that war is “killing, with neither glory, dignity nor chivalry, with neither restraint nor consideration in any respect.” Based on the occurrence of war in history, Barth discusses the ethics of war under the heading of the command of God the Creator, the command to live. The historical appearance thus plays a major role in his ethical discussion of this problem by defining the area in which the discussion must take place.

Because God speaks to us, we may live. Barth wrote:

God’s command applies to me inasmuch as I exist as a creature. As God speaks to me, God acknowledges me to be alive. And as God wills something from me, God commands me to live. I cannot be told this without

Problem der Gerechten Krieges“ in *Texte zur Barmer Theologischen Erklärung*, Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1984, 195ß213, esp. 207f.

understanding that the life of the creature in general is willed by God and is an object of respect.¹⁷⁶

There are thus two interrelated components of this command to live: the desire to live and the respect of life. In any discussion of what to do with regard to life, we must be aware of both of these components. God speaks to us, commands us. In doing so, God acknowledges that we are alive. From this, Barth draws three main points concerning life:

1. My life, or life in itself, is not the commandment, but is a component of that which is commanded.
2. My life is a component of what is commanded to me, I have no inherent “right” to it or claim upon it.
3. My life is only secondarily *mine*; it primarily and essentially is *God’s*, whose command I can hear. This command determines the fact that and to what extent this life is *my* life.

Life is not the greatest good, nor is it the highest principle that ought to determine our actions. As discussed above, good is that which God commands, so the desire for life in and of itself cannot be good. The desire for life is only good when it accords with God’s command, when the desire is for life in proper relationship to God.

In addition to the desire to live, we also have the desire for power – power to control our environment, or as much of it as is possible to control. Our desire to live is supported and inhibited by the circumstances of our lives, over which we have little control. Barth wrote:

Asserting our creaturely life takes place under demands and restrictions that are not primarily under our own control. For my creaturely life does not exhaust God’s creation. It is lived in the sphere and under the determinations of the general creaturely life around it... This is the problem of power. To be powerful means to be successful in maintaining one’s life by using whatever help the creaturely life around us affords, and overcoming the obstacles it poses. This will to for power is the will to succeed in this way. The simple affirmation of life, the will to satisfy natural needs, the will to be healthy, the

¹⁷⁶ (Barth 1981), 117

will to be happy, and the will to be individual all mean that I also have the will for power... And as we know that our life-act is neither good nor bad in itself but reveals itself to be good or bad in the event of our encounter with God's command, so it is with the will for power which is always implicated in this life-act.¹⁷⁷

This will to power, which is inherent in our will to live, leads to conflict between individuals and states. As the will to live is inherent in the fact that God commands us, and since the will to power is inherent in the will to live, Barth seems to imply that conflict is inherent in the fact that God commands us. The key to understanding this will to power is in the fact that in itself it is neither good (as Nietzsche argued in *Will to Power*) nor evil (as J. Burckhardt argued in *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*); our will to power is revealed to be good or bad in the encounter with God's command. Good as by definition for Barth only that which God declares to be good.

The possibility of God taking life back is acknowledged as a result of these three points. God gives life, God can also take it back and, what is more important for this discussion, God can command others to take life, acting as God's deputies. This is not another form of causality – the fact that God *may* command us to take life does not mean that God does so. Barth does not argue that killing in order to save life is command; he rather argues that God only commands us to kill under these conditions. In other words, the command to kill can only occur when that condition is present, the presence of that condition, however, does not casually mean the command to kill is present. There are goods for which God may command us to place our lives at risk. This may involve an individual decision, such as risking one's life to save someone else's, or it may involve a corporate decision, such as the decision to go to war. These decisions, as is true for all ethical decisions, can only be good when they are made in accordance with the command of God. Thus, war may be justifiable, but solely on the basis of God's command and not on a quality inherent in the situation itself.

Life can only be properly understood when the command to live is understood as the command of the Creator. It must be understood as *creaturely* life, reducing any

¹⁷⁷ (Barth 1981), 134-135.

egoism in discussions about life. Life is understood *relationally* as *life in relation to the Creator*, not *analogically*, where other life is understood as similar to *my* life. Other life is understood as being life in relation to the same Creator. The point here is not that *I* must live at all costs, but that I may live *for* God. Therefore, my desire to live must also include the possibility that I sacrifice my life as an expression of this desire to live. This understanding of life as creaturely life means that one can no longer understand other life solely as either helping or hindering one's own desire to live. Because one sees their life as creaturely life, they must also see other life as creaturely life. Therefore, one must respect the other's life, as they exist in the same situation.

Life is a loan from God. We have no inherent right to it and God can and sometime does command us to place our life at risk to sacrifice our life. Barth wrote:

God can take it [life] back. But as long as God does not do this, so long as a person has it, it is given to that person only as an inalienable loan.¹⁷⁸

We may also be commanded by God to take other's lives as God's deputy. We may only take other lives when God commands us to do so, and God only commands that within the two spheres of God the Creator's command to live: the desire to live and the respect of life. Life is lived in both of these "spheres" – not in a synthesis of both, but in a kind of unity where both are always present, although one may be emphasised more in any given moment, but never without the other being integrally present. Therefore, any discussion of war, the goal of which, Barth maintains, requires "... not merely the most skilful and courageous dedication and possible forfeiture of one's own life but also quite nakedly and brutally the killing of as many as possible of the persons who make up the opposing forces"¹⁷⁹ must involve both of these areas – the desire to live and the respect for life. God's command to go to war must occur within the area of these two spheres. If both are not present, neither is God's command to go to war. By the same token, the presence of both areas does not mean one is commanded to go to war. The area here delineated is, as discussed above, not a positive one but a negative one, marking the area within which the command of God to go to war *may* come. However, given that the decision to go to

¹⁷⁸ (Barth 1961), 404.

¹⁷⁹ (Barth 1961), 452.

war falls within both of these spheres does not guarantee that God's command to go to war is present. We must always listen for the command of God in every situation anew.

The Ethics of War

War is the execution which a people organized as a state, on account of its will to live, performs on another people which threatens its will to live. The problem of war is the question whether such an execution is possible in and in spite of respect for life.¹⁸⁰

War is killing in self-defence when commanded by God to do so— one group of people decides that the only defence to their existence, which is threatened by another State, is to attempt to kill as many persons of the opposing side as possible, thus eliminating the threat. The nature of war has changed in modern times, thus Luther's discussion of war is "pointless." Barth wrote:

The intervening [since the Middle Ages] change in the situation is that, in both practise and theory, the people itself has increasingly become the agent of war... We no longer have soldiers as we have cobblers and doctors but fundamentally everybody has become a soldier (the recent [1927] conscription of the whole male and female population from six years up in France and Italy is simply the logical climax of this development,) and it would obviously be a misuse of Luther to support the new ideology by his dialectic and thereby to evade the new and general problem. The new ideology of war, which is to be distinguished from the old one that Luther contested, is that, in case of war, a person as a member of the state unavoidably has an active part, whether directly or indirectly. That person has an active part, then, in the mass killing of enemy soldiers.¹⁸¹

The moral dilemma of going to war is whether this "mass killing of enemy soldiers" and the placing of one's own life at risk can be done in the respect for life. As discussed above, this respect for life is a result of God the Creator commanding us. Another way of asking this question is to ask whether the command to go to war that a nation believes it hears from God occurs within (even though at the boundary) the

¹⁸⁰ (Barth 1981), 154

¹⁸¹ (Barth 1981), 155.

area God has given for human activity. If that is the case, the command to go to war *may* be present. If not, then the command to go to war cannot be present. A State, in deciding to go to war, is deciding whether or not its citizens ought to attempt to kill as many of the enemy as possible while placing their own lives at risk. If the command of God is not present, then the State is calling on its citizens to commit mass murder. Moreover, as the State is made up of its citizens, the responsibility for this decision is borne by all members of the State.

Since war is such a terrible event and involves so much suffering, the question must be asked why there may be cases where war is justified. Barth wrote:

Why do we have to allow the possibility that in the light of the divine commandment this is a justifiable reason for war, so that a war waged for this reason must be described as a just war in spite of all the horrors which it will certainly entail? The obvious answer is that there may well be bound up with the independent life of a nation responsibility for the whole physical, intellectual and spiritual life of the people comprising it, and therefore their relationship to God. It may well be that in and with the independence of a nation there is entrusted to its people something which, without any claim or pretension, they are commissioned to attest to others, and which they may not therefore surrender. It may well be that with the independence of the state, and perhaps in the form of the legally constituted society guaranteed by it, they would also have to yield something which must not be betrayed, which is necessarily more important to than the preservation of life itself, and which is thus more important than the preservation of the lives of those who unfortunately are trying to take it from them. It may well be that they are thus forbidden by God to renounce the independent status of their nation, and that they must therefore defend it without considering either their own lives or the lives of those who threaten it. Christian ethics cannot possibly deny that this case may sometimes occur. The divine command itself posits and presents it as a case of extreme urgency.¹⁸²

The question then is under what circumstances may we hear God's command to go to war. It is important to remember that this command, as in all cases when God commands the taking of life, is a *Grenzfall*.¹⁸³ The first thing that must be said about a *Grenzfall* is that only God can determine when a specific situation is a *Grenzfall*:

¹⁸² (Barth 1961), 462.

¹⁸³ John Howard Yoder argues in his book *Karl Barth and the Problem of War* that Barth here falls into the casuistry he is trying to avoid. Yoder claims that Barth's concept of the *Grenzfall* is casuistic in that it states as the general principle that life can only be taken when life is threatened and then applies this principle in a specific case. However, this would only be casuistic if Barth claimed that at

Here as elsewhere the possibility of the *Grenzfall* is the particular possibility of God. Nor should we merely persuade ourselves that this is given to us. It is casuistical frivolity to try to do so. This is something we can only be told. If a man kills himself without being ordered to do so, then his action is murder. God may forgive him, but it is still murder, so that none can will to perpetrate it with uplifted head if he has faith in the gracious God who forgives sins.¹⁸⁴

Although we cannot determine when a *Grenzfall* is present, we can discuss under what conditions such a *Grenzfall* may be present. This does not mean we ascribe to

that point we have God's command to take life, a claim which he nowhere makes. It is at that point that God may command us to take life, but it is not definite that the command is present in such a case. Although Barth may argue casuistically, he does not fall into a casuistic ethics here, as Yoder misunderstands, contrary to his statement on page 17 that "at no point did the paper's argument rest upon a mistaken understanding of Professor Barth's position and intention", what Barth means by the term *Grenzfall*. Yoder wrote concerning Barth's view of suicide: "In the instance of suicide, Barth begins the transition from command to exception..." Yoder assumes that there is a general command to protect life, to which there may rarely be exceptions where the command requires the opposite: "Can it ever be that the protection of life, which as a general rule means that suicide is forbidden, may in certain cases mean the contrary?" (p 30) Concerning his discussion with Barth's view of war, Yoder wrote; "The discussion with Barth is... not a debate between pacifism and militarism, nor even between pacifism and non-pacifism. It is rather a debate to be carried on within the pacifist camp, between one position which is pacifist in all general statements it can make but announces in advance that it is willing to make major exceptions, and another possibility, nearly the same in theory, which is not able to affirm in advance the exceptional case." (page 52) Barth, as argued here, maintains that there is no ethical "rule" only the command of God spoken to a concrete individual in a concrete situation. The *Grenzfall* can therefore not mean a case where a general rule is either rescinded or requires an opposite action, as there can be no general rule. A *Grenzfall* is rather the boundary of what God will command us, as limited by God's revelation. With regard to war, Yoder makes much of Barth's statement that "The divine command [to go to war] itself posits and presents it [war] as a case of extreme emergency. I may remark in passing that I myself should see it as such a case if there were any attack on the independence, neutrality and territorial integrity of the Swiss Confederation, and I should speak and act accordingly." (CD III.4. 462) See Yoder, Chapter 9: The *Grenzfall* as a Tool of Ethical Thought, especially page 66: "'If you think there can be extreme cases [Grenzfälle], what kind of thing do you have in mind?' The defense of Switzerland is the kind of thing Barth has in mind... We face two possibilities. We can seek to define hypothetically the case in which Switzerland would be attacked and the conditions under which war would be commanded... or we can look at the point in history about which Barth could claim that an exception obtained." In a discussion concerning this section of the Church Dogmatics and its relevance to the debate concerning German rearmament, Barth said:

"The small printed section [CD III/4 462] – though only three and a half lines – plays an important role in the discussion, where I said: I personally, in considering Switzerland, and I would still say that I consider it worthwhile to fight a small war for Switzerland. ... I could perhaps have left out these three and a half lines. However, I thought it would be the decent thing to do to tell the reader that I know of a situation where I would say <<bellum iustum>>. We just came from the Hitler war. And I, for my part, was absolutely certain that Hitler must not be allowed into Switzerland, whatever else might happen with him. And I not only write against Hitler but would also take up a gun against him and would help to prevent this – I probably would not have prevented it – but I was nonetheless prepared to do so. And to support this I wrote these three and a half lines about Switzerland, you know. And not this is rolled out to prove: see – bellum iustum, there it is! I can only say that that is malicious. That's not the proper way to cite someone. Whoever read this passage honestly must have noticed that I just said with my last breath that perhaps it can and must happen yet again." (Barth 1963), 205. See (Yoder 1970), 57f.

¹⁸⁴ (Barth 1961), 413.

ourselves the ability to determine when such a situation has arisen. We must avoid that “casuistical frivolity.” The fact that God commands us has, as discussed above, ramifications for us. These ramifications include, amongst others, that we are commanded to live and to respect life. Within these boundaries, one can discuss the possibility of hearing God’s command to go to war. Not casuistically, as the just war theory does by stating conditions which, when fulfilled, justify war. Rather, we can discuss the conditions, created by the fact that God commands us, under which God may command us to kill.

In *Ethics*, Barth described how killing must be understood as a borderline case:

A feature of the admitted or nonadmitted knowledge of the command of life as the command of respect for life is that all these possibilities [killing in self-defence, capital punishment and war], which may actually take very different forms, have, in all historical periods and areas that have made use of them, the character of final reasons, borderline possibilities, extreme and by no means obvious or self-evident necessities... The genuinely or supposedly permissible or commanded killing of persons has always and everywhere been felt to be a final and dreadful thing, or at least something that is surrounded by all kinds of restraints. At this point, then, our first task is simply to emphasize that in all cases it is true that here no less than in suicide we have an extreme, a most extreme possibility which the command of respect surrounds with all kinds of possible question marks. Ethical reflection and instruction has done a great deal when it has simply underlined as heavily as possible the borderline character of this possibility.¹⁸⁵

Thus, war must always have the character of *ultima ratio*, of a last method to resolve a conflict. Christian ethics has the task of reminding the State of this, as Barth wrote in the *Church Dogmatics*:

A first essential is that war should not on any account be recognised as a normal, fixed and in some sense necessary part of what on the Christian view constitutes the just state, or the political order demanded by God... It [Christian ethics] cannot assure the state that in the exercise of power either the state or its organs may do gaily and confidently whatever they think is right. In such cases it must always confront them with the question whether there is really any necessity for this exercise.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ (Barth 1981), 144.

¹⁸⁶ (Barth 1961), 456.

In fact, war is not an essential element of the State, rather, it occurs as a result of the *failure* of the State to properly be State. Therefore, the Church is pacifist with regard to war under normal circumstances, although it cannot be pacifist in principle, as discussed above.

According to the Christian understanding, it is no part of the normal task of the state to wage war; its normal task is fashion peace in such a way that life is served and war kept at bay. If there is a mistake with pacifism, apart from the inadvisable ethical absolutism of its thesis, it consists in the abstract negation of war, as if war could be understood and negated in isolation and not in relation to the so-called peace which precedes it. Our attention should be directed to this relation. It is when a state does not rightly pursue its normal task that sooner or later it is compelled to take up the abnormal one of war, and therefore to inflict this abnormal task on other states.¹⁸⁷

The only case where war can be commanded by God is when it is *ultima ratio*, when the situation forces a State to decide either to go to war against a threat or to cease to exist. The reason that God may command a State to go to war in this situation is that something more precious than mere life may be bound up with the independent existence of the State. The question facing a state must therefore be existence or destruction and that State must be commanded by God to protect something even at the cost of the lives of its citizens and the citizens of the threatening country. If there are other options, then war is not the last possibility and a *Grenzfall* is not present. If the question facing a State is either to fight or give up its independence, then a *Grenzfall* may be present; God may be commanding that State to go to war. Therefore, there is an assumption that one State can bring another State into abnormal circumstances where war *may* be commanded. If this is not the case, war cannot be justified. Barth wrote:

This further point rests on the assumption that the conduct of one state or nation can throw another into the wholly abnormal situation of emergency in which not merely greater or lesser prosperity but its very existence and autonomy are menaced and attacked. In consequence of the attitude of this other state, a nation can find itself faced by the question whether it must surrender or assert itself as such in the face of the claims of the other.

¹⁸⁷ (Barth 1961), 458.

Nothing less than this final question must be at issue if war is to be just and necessary.¹⁸⁸

By means of extension, if a State has obligations by treaty or otherwise to another State whose existence is threaten, then that State may also be commanded by God to fulfil its obligation and go to war on behalf of the other State:

But a similar situation may arise in a different form, e.g., when a state which is not itself directly threatened or attacked considers itself summoned by the obligation of a treaty or in some other way to come to the aid of a weaker neighbour which does actually find itself in this situation. In solidarity with the state which it tries to help, it will then find itself in a position of true emergency. As a result of this type of situation, Christian ethics can no longer be absolutely pacifist, and can not oppose all military action and therefore also not all military armament.¹⁸⁹

To summarise: under normal circumstances, the Church is pacifist with regards to war. The Church cannot be pacifist as a principle, rejecting all forms of violent self-defence under all circumstances. War is not understood as always being sinful, rather, it is sinful under normal circumstances. It may occur that a “true emergency” or *Grenzfall* occurs where a state is commanded to go to war. This is always a case of *ultima ratio* where the very existence of a State is threatened by another. This does not casuistically guarantee that the *Grenzfall* is present; it however must be present for the command of God to go to war to be present. War is not commanded for any reason other than to protect the existence of a State – it can be justified when it is fought to expand a nation’s political or economic influence, it also cannot be fought to maintain a State’s standard of living.

If, then, the *Grenzfall* is present and a State goes to war, then it must do so with “joyous and reckless determination.”¹⁹⁰ The potential results of the war are irrelevant – one’s chances for success have no effect on God’s command. If God’s command to go to war is present, then going to war is righteous and ought to be understood as such. Barth wrote:

¹⁸⁸ (Barth 1961), 461.

¹⁸⁹ (Barth 1961), 462.

¹⁹⁰ (Barth 1961), 463.

There can certainly be no question of howling with the pack, or of enunciating a military code invented *ad hoc*, but only of preaching the Gospel of the lordship of God's free grace and of direction to the prayer which will not consist in the invocation of a pagan god of history and battles, but which will always derive from, and return to, the *dona nobis pacem*. In this form, however, the message of the Church may and should be a call to marital resolution which can be righteous only as an act of obedience but which as such can be truly righteous, which can be powerful only as an act of faith but which as such can be truly powerful.¹⁹¹

This understanding of war clearly falls under Luther's famous statement *pecca fortiter, crede fortius*. If you understand God's command to be to go to war, then do so boldly. If you are wrong to do so, God's grace is sufficient. This is one of the methods for understanding the command of God – if it is present, then you will go forward boldly and do so. If you hesitate or are unsure, then it may well be that you have failed to hear the command properly. Barth questions whether the persons involved in the plot to assassinate Hitler on the twentieth of July, 1944 had the command of God to do so:

When it was already too late, the attempt actually made by Count Claus von Stauffenberg on July 20, 1944, was bound to fail... We do not blame these men for what Kordt calls their (and his own) "inadequacy." The only lesson to be learned is that they had no clear and categorical command from God to do it. Otherwise they would have had to overcome what was not in any case an ethical difficulty. Nor can we seriously blame these men for seriously considering and even deciding upon assassination. In such a situation it might well have been the command of God. For all we know, perhaps it was, and they failed to hear it.¹⁹²

Therefore, if we believe we have the command of God to kill, then we must do so resolutely and in the confidence that that action is righteous. If we are not that certain, then we ought to listen again for God's command. It may well be that we indeed do have the command to take life, but it may not be.

¹⁹¹ (Barth 1961), 463.

¹⁹² (Barth 1961), 449.

The Ethics of World War Two

Barth clearly supported the Allied war effort against the Axis. He therefore understood that God was commanding the Allies to fight. The question we therefore have to deal with here is how this command of God is present, how did Barth understand his situation not only to allow the possibility of a *Grenzfall*, but indeed that this situation was a *Grenzfall*.

In his lecture (discussed above) “Verheißung und Verantwortung der christlichen Gemeinde im heutigen Zeitgeschehen” Barth analyses the circumstances of World War Two in order to understand God’s will and governance in the events so to assist in ethical decision-making concerning the war. For Barth, the war began in 1933 with the founding of a “warrior-State like the world has never seen before.” This State wanted to be godlike and made godlike claims upon and promises to the German people. The Jews were, from the very beginning, the archenemies of this State. The international community did not always understand that this was not merely an internal German matter, but affected everyone. Three years after the founding of this State, it began to threaten other States around it – making and breaking treaties with them at will. For the National-Socialist State, the “Jewish problem” was the central issue. This was so at the very beginning, and became increasingly clear as time went on. The reason for the rabid anti-Semitism is that the Nazis, as discussed above, wanted to make themselves like God. “One does not fight against the Jew Jesus for no reason. One raises one’s self up against the secret of God’s decision.”¹⁹³ The fact that the Jews are God’s chosen people, through whom he blessed all people, made them the enemy of the Nazis, who wanted to be master of not only their own destiny but of the destiny of the world. They believed that the Germans were the superior race and should be the lord of the Earth. The rabid Anti-Semitism of the Nazi’s was the result of their ideological belief that the Germans were the “master race.” Any rejection of the Jews must include a rejection of the Jew

¹⁹³ (Barth 1944) 320.

Jesus: “The Jewish problem is the Christ problem.”¹⁹⁴ The mass destruction of the Jews in the Shoah must lead the Church to pray for forgiveness. Barth wrote:

What kind of a picture is this, which is brought before our eyes in the middle of the current events, in the needless and defenceless slaughtering and sacrificing of the Jewish people? Is it not the one who was punished and tortured for everyone else, the servant of God from the book of Isaiah, is it not “in a mirror darkly” our Lord Jesus Christ himself who, in the destiny of each of the innumerable murdered or buried alive, in overfull cattle cars or finally murdered by poison gas Jews from Germany and France, Poland and Hungary, is made visible? What an amazing sign of revelation, what a letter, what a word, what a proof for the existence of God! Is it possible that a Christian congregation does not see what, or who, this is about? That a Christian does not fall to his or her knees: All of our sins you have born! Lord, have mercy upon us! Not the Jew, but in the shadow of the persecuted and killed Jews you are the one, whose rejection, in all its entire incomprehensibility is shown here yet again, of your lonely death we are here once again reminded.¹⁹⁵

Therefore, the Nazi ideology by rejecting the Jews must also reject Jesus and is therefore directly opposed to the Christian church. The reason Barth opposed the Nazis is clear.

The Nazis had to reject the Jews in order to make their godlike claim upon the Germany. They wanted to be lord of all in their State: “The German venture existed essentially and at its core – and just that is the German solution to the Jewish problem – in this, that it wanted to intervene in the rule of God.”¹⁹⁶

Precisely in line with the genuine Christian belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and with the belief that all power in heaven and on earth has been given to him, we must say to German National-Socialism neither Yes, nor Yes and No, but, from our entire hearts and in firm determination, we must say No. Otherwise, one must have not properly understood the message of the Bible nor have thought it through to the end or one must suffer from a kind of schizophrenia, in which one has one has quite consciously different standards for internal and for external living, thinking and desiring.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ (Barth 1944), 318.

¹⁹⁵ (Barth 1944), 318-319.

¹⁹⁶ (Barth 1944), 322.

¹⁹⁷ (Barth 1942), 264.

Therefore, it is clear that Nazism is to be rejected by the Church. Nevertheless, that in itself does not mean that the *Grenzfall* is present. One of the first criteria for the possibility of the *Grenzfall* is that it be the last possible action. For Barth that was already the case in 1938 when France and Great Britain gave in to Hitler's demands concerning the *Sudetenland* in Czechoslovakia. During that crisis, while Hitler was meeting with the leaders of France and Great Britain in Munich, Barth wrote in his well-known letter to Professor Hromadka in Prague:

As of yet – I am writing this on Monday afternoon – the worst, that the Western powers agree to the insane demands of Germany, has not happened. But if it should happen? Will your government and your people nonetheless remain firm? I can clearly see what kind of a never-ending burden and suffering you would bring upon yourselves. But I still dare to hope that the sons of the old Hussites would then show Europe, which has become too soft, that there still are men around today. Every Czechoslovakian soldier who then fights and suffers will also do so for us, and, I can wholeheartedly say, he will also do so for the Church of Jesus Christ, which can only fall into ridiculousness or eradication in the orbit of Hitler and Mussolini.¹⁹⁸

The Western powers did in fact give into the German demands, and the Czechoslovakian government did not fight the Germans. Six months later, the Germans broke the agreement of Munich and took over all of Czechoslovakia:

We experienced in the autumn of 1938 – and all of the church-bells were rung as a result – the peace agreement of Munich, which six months later was ripped up by the victors who forced that agreement through. And so it continued – until the resistance of the others became, reluctantly enough, unavoidable as a result of the new threats and acts of violence.¹⁹⁹

It is thus clear that, for Barth, at least, war was the *ultima ratio* against the Nazi aggression.

Another element of the *Grenzfall* is that the decision is made that the command of God is given without consideration of the possible result of following that command. If God commands us to go to war, then the question of our success or failure is irrelevant. As mentioned above, Barth felt that the conspirators around Count von Stauffenberg did not hear the command of God to kill Hitler

¹⁹⁸ (Barth 1938), 58.

¹⁹⁹ (Barth 1944), 314.

unconditionally, because they were not willing to do so without regard for the consequences. If war is justified, then the chance for success is absolutely irrelevant. Since a *Grenzfall* is determined by believing that God is commanding one to do something that is not normally acceptable, the chances of success can play no role. If that were a criterion, that would mean that there are other possibilities against which the chances for success are to be measured in which case all other possibilities have not yet been exhausted. If all other possibilities have not been exhausted, then a State is not justified in going to war. War can only be chosen in “the last hour of the darkest day,” when the State is in a “true emergency” “This is the duty of the church and Christian ethics, to remind the State of the horrors of war, and that the decision to go to war, when not truly a *Grenzfall* and commanded by God, is a decision to commit mass murder.” Barth wrote:

In this matter, Christian ethics must above all itself feel a distinct terror and, with that, a distinct distance to war, and it must make that terror and distance clear to others.²⁰⁰

The church (including theology and Christian ethics) must therefore continue to prolong this decision; to throw its weight against the decision to go to war until this “last hour of the darkest day” has arrived. Then:

If it [Christian ethics] has said all there is to be said about the just peace and the practical avoidability of war; if it has honestly and resolutely opposed a radical militarism, it may then add that, should the command of God require a nation to defend itself in such an emergency, then it not only may but should do so. It may also add that if this is basically the only reason for war on the basis of its constitution and history and in the minds of all its responsible citizens, then it may and should arm for it even in the peacetime.²⁰¹

The question is when that “last hour” has arrived. Barth’s answer to this is discussed above. His success in answering this question will be discussed below, in chapter four.

²⁰⁰ (Barth 1961), 456.

²⁰¹ (Barth 1961), 462.

Barth and the Holocaust: Humanitarian Intervention

For Barth, the Holocaust was the final expression of the claim to absolute power of Hitler and the Nazi leadership. Barth does not argue that the Allies should fight against Germany in order to protect the Jewish people²⁰², as important as that may be. He rather argues that because the Nazi's make sinful claims to have absolute authority they are to be resisted. The Holocaust is an expression of this sinful claim to authority.

Barth regretted that the Barmen Declaration of 1934, for which he was largely responsible, did not mention the Nazi's anti-Semitism.²⁰³ In a letter to Eberhard Bethge from May 1967 concerning the publication of Bethge's biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Barth wrote:

I have learned many things about Bonhoeffer for the first time, or they have first made an impact on me, in your book... Especially new to me was the fact that in 1933 and the years following, Bonhoeffer was the first and almost only one to face and tackle the Jewish question so centrally and energetically. I have long since regarded it as a fault on my part that I did not make this question a decisive issue, at least publicly in the church conflict (e.g. in the two Barmen Declarations I drafted in 1934). A text in which I might have done so would not, of course, have been acceptable to the mindset of even the "confessors" of that time, whether in the reformed or the general synod. But this does not excuse the fact that since my interests were elsewhere I did not at least formally put up a fight on the matter.²⁰⁴

As early as 1933, shortly following Hitler's rise to power, Barth wrote:

The Judenfrage is clearly, from a theological point-of-view, the expression of everything that is happening in our time. ... Precisely in the Judenfrage I could not go the smallest step with National Socialism. If at any point then here, I believe, one must stop and see the boundary beyond which one can only go by betraying the Gospel.²⁰⁵

²⁰² For an exhaustive study of Barth's relation to the Jews, see (Busch 1996). Busch makes the suffering at the Jews more central to Barth's theological and political work of the 1930s and 1940s than I do here.

²⁰³ See (Barth 1984) for a collection of Barth's later comments on Barmen.

²⁰⁴ (Barth 1981), 250.

²⁰⁵ Letter to Fr. Dalmann from 1. September 1933. Quoted in (Busch 1996), 49

Barth preached a sermon in December 1933 concerning Jesus the Jew:

He had to preach again on 10 December. This particular sermon caused a stir by its clear recognition that 'Jesus Christ was a Jew'. It touched on the 'Jewish question - not because I wanted to touch on it, but because I had to touch on it in expounding the text (which on this occasion, too, was prescribed by the lectionary). Some of the congregation left the church in protest during the sermon. Writing to one woman from the congregation afterwards in a letter, Barth confirmed that 'anyone who believes in Christ, who was himself a Jew, and died for Gentiles and Jews, *simply cannot* be involved in the contempt for Jews and ill-treatment of them which is now the order of the day.'²⁰⁶

*Kristallnacht*²⁰⁷, in English *Crystal Night*, was the first organized, violent persecution of the Jews in Germany. Arno J. Mayer describes this tragic event:

The infamous Crystal Night of November 9-10, 1938 – the twentieth anniversary of the revolution of 1918 and the fifteenth anniversary of the Munich Putsch of 1923 – was no more spontaneous than the great boycott of five and a half years before. At about midnight, Gestapo locals were notified by phone and telegraph that at the "earliest possible moment you are to take actions against Jews, in particular against their synagogues," whose archives were to be spared. They were also to arrest "between 20,000 and 30,000 Jews," preferably "wealthy Jews." A subsequent order specified that the Jews to be interned in concentration camps should be healthy adult males of under sixty years of age, and that they should not be roughed up. ...

The assaults started at 1 a.m. on November 10 and continued full-force until early that evening. The targets for attack were identical all over the German Reich. Synagogues were set on fire, while Torah scrolls, prayer books, and tallithim were thrown into the streets and burned. Firemen were summoned not to put out the flames but to keep the fire from spreading to adjoining buildings. The licensed vandals also attacked Jewish-owned stores in commercial districts, breaking shop- windows and tossing merchandise into the street. Quite a few shops were either completely gutted or severely damaged. ...

By all accounts, considerable crowds gathered to witness the desecration of synagogues, the sack of Jewish shops and the arrest of Jewish neighbors.²⁰⁸

This event clearly demonstrated the nature of the Nazis' Jewish policies. Three weeks later Barth gave a lecture entitled "The Church & the Political Problem of Our

²⁰⁶ (Busch 1976), 234-235.

²⁰⁷ In English, *Crystal Night* or *the night of the broken glass*; a reference to the broken shop windows of Jewish stores.

²⁰⁸ (Mayer 1990), 168-169.

Day.” This lecture was, to a large extent, a response to the *Kristallnacht*. Barth wrote:

Quite apart from National Socialism’s revelation of itself, the Church which cannot have heard the Word of the true God in vain ought to have established from her own perceptions and knowledge, that in the innermost and real and most holy essence of National Socialism, in its mystical faith and not in any “excrescences,” there has entered the field not just another God, not just a strange God, but a hostile God, an evil God and a hostile, evil service of God. But the really decisive, biblical, theological reason for the church establishing this, does not lie in the various anti-Christian assertions and actions of National Socialism. On the contrary it lies in that thing which just in this last week has especially moved us, viz. the anti-Semitism, which is one of its principles. Were this to stand by itself it would quite in itself suffice to justify the sentence; National Socialism is the anti-Church fundamentally hostile to Christianity. ... When that occurs which in this matter is now in Germany notoriously resolved upon and already put into practise, namely the “physical extermination” of the people of Israel, the burning of Synagogues and Scriptures, the rejection of the “Jew God” and the “Jew Bible” as being the very essence of all that which ought to be an abomination to the German “man” – then it is *thereby* and *thereby alone* decided that there the attempt is being made to strike a mortal blow into the roots of the Church. Can anyone so much as want to close his or her ears to all the unutterable misery caused by this anti-Semitic pest, crying to Heaven in every German country? But how is it possible that our Christian ears do not tingle in view of what this plight and malignancy mean? Objectively, what are we without Israel? The one who rejects and persecutes the Jews rejects and persecutes the one who died for the sins of the Jews – and then, and only *thereby* for our sins as well. The one who is a radical enemy of the Jews, were that one in every other regard an angel of light, shows that he or she is, as such, a radical enemy of Jesus Christ. Anti-Semitism is a sin against the Holy Ghost. For anti-Semitism means rejection of the *grace* of God. But National Socialism lives, moves, and has its being in anti-Semitism.²⁰⁹

Barth continues by arguing that such a State as a Nazi Germany has ceased to be a just State and this State’s expansion must be resisted:

Whatever the Church may have to say, or not have to say, to other wars – in this regard we speak also of the church and the political question of *to-day* this is certain: as a praying Church she must support armed defence against the advancement of the dissolution of the just State.²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ (Barth 1939), 50-51.

²¹⁰ (Barth 1939), 79.

As impassioned as Barth's rejection of anti-Semitism is, it does not amount to an argument that the use of military force against Germany was justified on humanitarian grounds in order to protect the Jews and others who were persecuted by the Nazis.²¹¹ Resistance is called for against an unjust State that seeks to expand its influence. For Barth, the Nazis anti-Semitism was a result of their claim to absolute authority. It is because of this claim that Nazism must be rejected. It is also as a result of this claim to absolute authority over life and death that the Holocaust occurred.²¹²

It is in this way that one can see Barth arguing for a humanitarian intervention – not in order to prevent the torture and death of a large number of innocent persons, as important as that may be, but to prevent a person or group from making Godlike claims to authority over all areas of life. This is because, as discussed above, Barth argues that it is a fact of human existence that humans exist as *created* beings. Any claim to absolute authority over all areas of life is therefore to be understood as sinful and resisted. The claim by a government to have authority over life and death is therefore an expression of human sinfulness by human usurping God's authority as Creator. This usurpation often, if not always, results in the suffering of people under this sinful authority of the State. In this way, Barth can be understood to be arguing for humanitarian military intervention backwards. The problem is not primarily the suffering caused by an evil authority; the problem is the claim to power that a civil authority must make in order to persecute persons and groups within (and without) its jurisdiction. The suffering caused by a government is therefore a symptom of the root problem that must be resisted. It is in this way that

²¹¹ One important reason for this was that the extent of the Nazis persecution of the Jews was not known in 1938, when Barth began to argue for military action against Germany, nor was it known in 1939 when the war started. In 1965 Barth wrote to Oscar Moppert "... we in Switzerland first began to learn about the nature and dimension of the horror of the persecution of the Jews after the end of the war." (Barth 1975), 287. In addition, the Holocaust itself did not begin until after that war was underway. There was therefore no way Barth could have argued that military intervention was necessary in order to prevent the death of innocent Jews (and others).

²¹² Irving Greenberg argues in a somewhat similar way, although he locates the decisive element of the Holocaust not in the Nazi's claim to absolute authority over life and death but in the modern belief in the absolute authority of rationality over life (what Niebuhr would term henotheism). Greenberg wrote "No assessment of modern culture can ignore the fact that science and technology – the accepted flower and glory of modernity – now climaxes in the factories of death; the awareness that unlimited, value-free use of knowledge ... had paved the way for bureaucratic and scientific death campaign." (Greenberg 1977), 15. Bertold Klappert provides an interesting discussion of this issue and cites Greenberg. See (Klappert 1994), chapter 10.

Barth's support of the Allies must be understood, especially since that support came before Barth (or anyone else) knew of the atrocities that the Nazi government would commit.

The Barmen Declaration, as Barth wrote to Bethge, did not mention the Jewish situation in Germany. However, the root cause of the problem is clearly and directly refuted throughout the Barmen Declaration:

1. ... Jesus Christ, as he is testified to us in the Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God, whom we are to hear, whom we are to trust and obey in life and in death. ...
2. ... We repudiate the false teaching that there are areas of our life in which we belong not to Jesus Christ but another lord ...
5. ... We repudiate the false teaching that the state can and should expand beyond its special responsibility to become the single and total order of human life, and also thereby fulfill the commission of the church. We repudiate the false teaching that the church can and should expand beyond its special responsibility to take on the characteristics, functions and dignities of the state, and thereby become itself an organ of the state.²¹³

It is this root cause of idolatry or henotheism (to use Niebuhr's term) that provided the reason for Barth's support for resistance to the Nazi State. This resistance included, at least from 1938 on, war against Germany.

Barth, for the reasons discussed here, would never say that the claim to power of the Nazi State, or the tragedy of the Holocaust, show when war is permissible. War is only morally permissible when the command of God to go to war is present; then going to war is not only permissible, it is required. When a government claims to have the authority to deem a group – be it a group based on race or religion or some other criteria – to be unworthy not only of the protection of the government but to be unworthy of life, it is clear that that government has overstepped its God-given authority and has become demonic. That does not guarantee that war is morally commanded, but it does indicate in Barthian terms that the command of God to go to war may be present. Therefore, a humanitarian crisis may mean that the command of God to go to war is present, so that other nations ought to use force to intervene in that nation's affairs and prevent, or at least stop the suffering that a demonic State is causing. But, for Barth, there can be no set of criteria – humanitarian or other – that

²¹³ The Barmen Declaration, in (Leith 1982), 518-522.

demonstrates that a nation ought to go to war. This would, as discussed above, be casuistry and sinful. Yet there is a humanitarian use of military force when the command of God to go to war is heard in the suffering of people under an unjust authority.

Chapter III: H. Richard Niebuhr

Introduction

Niebuhr's work is of a different type from Barth. Niebuhr was more concerned with relationship between faith and ethics than with dogmatics proper. William Stacy Johnson in his introduction to *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture* stated the matter succinctly:

In the narrow sense of creedal formulas, doctrine was never the primary focus for H. Richard Niebuhr. Niebuhr fits much more readily into Karl Barth's category of the "irregular" or "occasional" theologians, that vast majority of theologians for whom what matters most is not the system-building of dogmatic treatises but the application of theological insight into pressing problems of the day, whose highest work is not creating a *summa* for all time but speaking an intelligible word for *this* time.²¹⁴

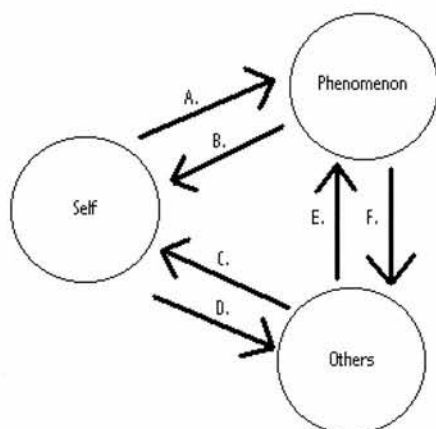
We therefore will have to look more at his ethics and less at his theology than we did with Barth. In looking at Niebuhr's ethics and understanding of humans – before – God and God – before – humans, as Niebuhr stated it, we will also look at his theological and philosophical propositions that support these arguments. The theology is implied in ethics, rather than the other way around. Unlike Barth, however, we will not look at his dogmatics.

Ethics of responsibility

Niebuhr argues that there have been two "classic" approaches to ethics: a **deontological** method and a **teleological** method. Deontologic ethics argues from the point of view of law: human beings are understood as citizens who make and obey laws. The ethical question here is: "Which law am I obeying?" Teleologic ethics, on the other hand, understands humans as makers who seek to bring about a goal – the ethical question is "Which end am I serving?" and "Is this decision conducive or prohibitive of accomplishing this end?" Niebuhr offers a third symbol to these other

²¹⁴ (Niebuhr and Johnson 1996), x.

two, the symbol of **responsibility**, which asks the question: “What is happening now?” Humans are understood as *responders*, always engaged in dialogue; their actions are always in response to prior actions upon them and in anticipation of responses to their responses. There are four elements to responsibility: first, all of our actions are *responses*; second, our responses are responses to our *interpretations* of prior action upon us; third, we are *accountable* for our actions in that we must act in anticipation of responses to our action; fourth, all of our actions are done in *social solidarity* with others, in other words, in a continuing discourse.



This diagram shows Niebuhr’s triadic nature of response: The self comes to the, for lack of a better term, phenomenon not as a blank page but with a history of her or his own and her or his culture. The self interprets a phenomenon (B). She or he interprets this not in itself, but by means of memory – that is, categories, language and schemes inherited from the culture (C) and knowledge gained (E and F) previous encounters with either this phenomenon or phenomena interpreted as being similar. However, the self’s interpretation also is made in anticipation of a response (confirming or refuting) from the phenomenon to the self’s response (A). The self also verifies her or his interpretation of and response to the phenomena with others who also have encountered it (C and D).

A good example of this triadic nature of response is the action of the self in response to a natural event. The natural event is interpreted as thing-like; in other

words, we do not interpret it as *knowing* us. This interpretation comes from my society. I also use language and other symbols from my society in order to understand it better. In other words, from my community I receive the categorical schemes used to organise and interpret the natural event. I also receive from my relation to others verification of my reports of the encounter, as other members of the society have also been in encounter with this natural event or similar ones. The individual who is responding to various natural events and various other selves is a unity – he or she is not one “I” when responding to X and a different one when responding to Y. This unity exists because we are always responding to a third element we interpret as being active in all the others. This “third element” is more universal – it is active in all the other Thous and Its to which we respond. It is what enables us to centre our experience. It is the centre that allows us to interpret and value all events to which we respond. For example, the patriot responds to all things and interprets all events by means of this central “loyalty” or the thing to which she or he is responding in all other things, in this case, by means of his or her nation. All events and persons are valued on the basis of what they can do to further the nation. We have conflicting loyalties, which are active at different times in different situations and may come into conflict with each other. This will lead Niebuhr to the conclusion that one of the main aspects of his symbol of responsibility is the quest for personal integrity. This move toward the universal is found in teleological as well as deontologic ethics; in deontology we end up asking, “What is the universal form of the law?” In teleological ethics, we ask, “What idea is being realised in the totality of being? What is the form of the good that is the form of the whole?” In responsibility, we ask, “What am I responding to in all of my responses to actions upon me?”

Teleological and deontological ethics both operate under the assumption that humans are masters of their destiny and can shape the future by their current actions or determine the proper action on the basis of the general principles applied to particular situations (casuistry). For Niebuhr, suffering demonstrates that humans are not the masters of their destiny:

Because suffering is the exhibition of the presence in our existence of that which is not under our control, or of the intrusion into our self-legislating

existence of an activity operating under another law than ours, it cannot be brought adequately within the spheres of teleological and deontological ethics, the ethics of man-the-maker, or man-the citizen.²¹⁵

It is war where one most clearly sees the problem of suffering – the relatively innocent suffering for the sins of the relatively guilty. This shows, according to Niebuhr, that we are not the makers of our own destiny nor do we live in a universe governed by retributive justice in which the good flourish and the evil suffer. We rather live in a web of relations many of which lie outside of our control yet have profound impact on our life. As both teleological and deontological ethics fail to take adequate account of this aspect of human existence, a different model is required. For Niebuhr's ethics, the responsible self is a "time-full and historic being." For teleological and deontological theories, the triadic understanding of time as past, present and future is not of much importance²¹⁶. In deontology, a person responds to universal law that is by definition beyond all time – as Kant said: "The future is not one of my concerns." In teleology, a person is seen as striving to accomplish some goal in the future, in the limited time allotted to a person, but it lacks any understanding of the critical present or of the past. The present is only understood in terms of the goal to be realised in the future. Responsibility provides a more adequate model for understanding the time-full and historical being. The past and future are always present to this person – the past as still-present and future as already-present. The past is present as memory – habits of behaviour, speech, thought, memories of past encounters (guilt). The future is present as our expectations and anxieties about impending questions, unfamiliar actions and encounters. These both affect my present encounters: the social past provides me with language, modes of understanding and interpreting present encounters, while the personal past colours my interpretations of current encounters (fear, guilt, joy, past meetings, past responses). The future is also a major influence on my current responses: the

²¹⁵ (Niebuhr 1963), 60.

²¹⁶ Gotthard Oblau wrote concerning Barth's understanding of time: "Analogous to the attempt to come to terms with the nature of the reality of the past, we also see the attempt to subsume the *future* ontologically to the present. One says that the future has its materialiter in the present. ... Barth sees a principal difference between the telos implicit in the present and future existence. The criterion of difference is not the difference between noetic and ontic. The difference consists in that the noetic or ontic telos of a given situation or action is does not belong solely to the future, but is also a predicate of the present. This telos nonetheless remains future in relation to the future." (Oblau 1988), 48, 50.

question of whether or not I expect to encounter in the future the agency acting on me now is one example of this influence. Therefore, the question is not only of rightness or wrongness, nor of goodness or badness, but also of their fittingness or unfittingness in the total movement in time, in the whole conversation.

The responsible self also has more freedom, as the question of human freedom is “the question of the self’s ability in its present to change its past and future and to achieve or receive a new understanding of its ultimate historical context.”²¹⁷ There are two ways in which we can change our inherited patterns of interpretation: **anti-traditionally** or by means of a **reinterpretation of the past**. The anti-traditional method is the way of Descartes and radical empiricism. It entails the rejection of inherited beliefs about the nature of reality for the method of empirical research – if a belief is not empirically verifiable, then it cannot be true. This method has been most successful in the natural sciences, but can only succeed in the social realm when it is able to reduce all others (persons, ideas, and societies) to objects. On the other hand, the method of reinterpreting the past does not reject the past, as the anti-traditional method does, but re-examines and reinterprets it in light of new understandings. In understanding our past in a different way, our present attitudes and actions can be changed. A new orientation of the self can also result from reinterpretations of the future. Reinterpreting the past, however, is not sufficient to transform our present “understanding of action upon us or our general mode of fitting response so long as our sense of the ultimate context remains unrevised.” The great religions, and Christianity in particular, challenge our ultimate context, and, thereby, our very being.

Humans have their being, according to Niebuhr, in absolute dependence. We do not choose to exist; a radical action has thrown us into existence. Indeed, it is questionable whether we can choose to cease to exist – *biocide* is clearly possible, but is suicide? The act by which one exists cannot be interpreted – it is a unique act which we cannot understand by any kind of analogy, nor can we understand it by referring to other, similar events that have happened to us. It is a unique event, although it happened to every person. This question of mere being is deepened by the question of particular being: Why am I I? Why am I this particular individual? The

²¹⁷ (Niebuhr 1963), 101.

first part of answering this question is to recognise that I am who I am as a result of action upon me, as discussed above. The better I can understand this, the more fitting my responses to actions upon me can be. The better one understands their biological functions in terms of *response*, the better they can respond to their body; for example, when someone with heart problems exercises in order to improve their health. Understanding my intellectual ideas as coming from the actions of others upon me also helps me to understand that these ideas do not come from some kind of pure reason, but are conditioned by my experience.

The feeling of absolute dependence is very uncomfortable, most people respond by ignoring it, asking, “What is human?” rather than “Why am I I?” thereby moving from the personal to generalities, turning the “I” into an object, not a self. Thus, we ask what the meaning of human life is, rather than what the meaning of *my* life is. The other way of responding to this dependence is to interpret the radical action by which I am I as the action of some deluded power.

Both of these responses are expressions of faith, but of *negative* faith and, therefore, are inconsistent with Christian faith. Niebuhr defines faith as

... the attitude of the self in its existence toward all the existences that surround it, as beings to be relied upon or to be suspected. It is the attitude that appears in all the weariness and confidence of life as it moves about among the living. It is fundamentally trust or distrust in being itself... Faith as trust or distrust accompanies all our encounters with others and qualifies all our responses. But it is the chief ingredient in our interpretation of the radical act or agency by which we are selves, here and now.²¹⁸

The interpretation of the agency that throws us into being is the most basic element in our fundamental interpretation of the world. There are only two ways to respond: trust or distrust. If we assume this agency is neutral and does not work for or against us, then we cannot trust it anymore than if we see it as a malevolent force. If we call this agency “God,” it may indicate a positive understanding of it, since God in common parlance means “good.” This fundamental trust or distrust colours all our responses. Indeed, it is this power to which we respond in all our encounters that gives us our unity and our integrity. This question is essential for the question of to

²¹⁸ (Niebuhr 1963), 118.

which society I respond in my actions. If I always seek to respond to the One creative power, then all my companions are part of one universal society, which has at its centre neither me, nor any cause, but the transcendent One. This also has major ramifications for my understanding of good and evil: if I trust the power that created me and all that is, then all that is, is good. In summary, Niebuhr wrote:

Monotheistic idealism [teleology] says: 'Remember God's plan for your life.' Monotheistic deontology commands: 'Obey God's law in all your obediences to finite rules.' Responsibility says: 'God is acting in all actions upon you. So respond in all actions upon you as to respond to his action.'²¹⁹

Sin is, according to the deontological model, disobedience to law and must be punished. Our current problems are the result of past sins. The first question is therefore, "Does the punishment fit the crime?" The second question is, "Why do the innocent suffer and the unrighteous flourish?" For Niebuhr, this question is paramount for discussing the morality of war, an event in which we very clearly see the innocent suffering for the sins of the guilty. We will return to this below.

According to this model, salvation is the pardoning of the transgressor – provided she or he repents of their sins. This position often, though not always, leads to a substitutionary atonement theory of the crucifixion. This symbol has significantly changed the lives of many people, and its symbols (such as "commandment," "obedience," "justification," etc.) have become imbedded in our Christian discourse. However, it does present certain problems. There is a paradox between law and Gospel – the law requires us to love God and neighbour, but if it is a requirement, then it is not love. Also: the action of the one redeemed must be obedient to the will of another (God), yet, if redeemed, then that obedience must be freedom.

In the teleological mode, sin is understood as *hamartia*, missing the mark. It is vice; the perverse direction human drives strive to go. The consequences of sin here are loss and confusion, rather than guilt. Salvation is then the restoration to humans of the vision of God and the restoration of reflected image of God in humans. It is also the gift of the ability to move again toward the proper *telos*. This model has been an effective guide to conduct for many individuals and groups and

²¹⁹ (Niebuhr 1963), 126.

has provided many insights into the human situation. However, it also presents some problems. There is a problem of vision and image: the goal of life is to be seen by God, known by God and loved by God, yet is also the perfection of the one who is being seen by God. H. Richard Niebuhr's biggest problem with this model is that it is *anthropocentric*. He wrote:

The theory of teleology, whether Christian or non-Christian, always directs attention to the primacy of the *human* pursuit of the ideal good. But it remains most difficult to reconcile this with the Christian conviction and experience of the primacy of *God's* action: in making himself known by the revelation of his goodness rather than allowing himself to be found by search; in giving the faith, the love, and the hope that aspire toward him; in creating and re-creating, making and remaking. There is always a surd, a contradiction, when the image of man-the-maker and the image of God-the-creator and re-creator are combined in one picture.²²⁰

In practice, both theories tend to be used together to understand the human situation. "The law is introduced into the scheme of salvation by restoration of the image, or the idea of perfection is introduced into a scheme of thinking that takes obedience as its point of departure."²²¹ This does not solve the problems with each model, and there are many points of conflict between both of them that also remain unresolved. The combination is therefore incomplete.

However, when one uses the model of responsibility to understand both the deontological and teleological models, many problems are resolved. As in deontological ethics, the fitting response to divine command is obedience, but that is not the only kind of action to which we respond – there are also other kinds of actions requiring a different kind of response. Our obedience or disobedience is also understood as being less dependent on our understanding the law itself and more dependent on our interpretation of the one acting upon us with the command. The Gospel, understood as a declaration of divine action, requires a different response than the divine command.

Ethics of responsibility also provides assistance with the problems in teleological ethics. Since all human making is in response to prior action, the

²²⁰ (Niebuhr 1963), 134-135

²²¹ (Niebuhr 1963), 135.

problem of anthropocentrism is solved – human action is a secondary response to the primary action of God. And since the goal of human life must be understood in eschatological rather than teleological terms, the problem of vision and image is also solved. Responsibility does not replace or supplant deontology or teleology, it merely provides a new means to understand them and, at the same time, provides a means to understand other kinds of human behaviour.

Sin is understood with this model as being internal division and conflict. This results from being one person yet, at the same time, responding to many different events in many different ways. Without any way of unifying these events, the individual's responses remain unreconciled and not unified. In all of my multiple, non-unified responses I am not true to the One who acts *in all actions* upon me. The question is how do we find unity in all of the events to which we respond. This leads to Niebuhr's understanding of God's presence in human history.

God and History in Niebuhr's Thought

Niebuhr makes a distinction between external and internal history. External history is history viewed objectively and neutrally, "the succession of events which an uninterested spectator can see from the outside."²²² It is thus the impersonal history of objects. Internal history is personal; it is *our* history that has meaning for us as participants in it. The difference between the two is crucial for an understanding of Niebuhr's ethics of war, so we must discuss it at some length. Niebuhr illustrates the difference by referring to the American Declaration of Independence:

The distinction between *our* history and events in impersonal time, or between history as lived and as contemplated from the outside, may be illustrated by contrasting parallel descriptions of the same event. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address begins with history: 'Four-score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created free and equal.' The same event is described in the *Cambridge Modern History* in the following

²²² (Niebuhr 1941), 44.

fashion: 'On July 4, 1776, Congress passed the resolution which made the colonies independent communities, issuing at the same time the well-known Declaration of Independence. If we regard the Declaration as the assertion of an abstract political theory, criticism and condemnation are easy. It sets out with a general proposition so vague as to be practically useless. The doctrine of equality of men, unless it be qualified and conditioned by reference to special circumstance, is either a barren truism or a delusion.'

The striking dissimilarity between these two accounts may be explained as being due merely to a difference of sentiment; the blind devotion of the patriot is opposed to the critical acumen and dispassionate judgment of the scientific historian. But the disparity goes deeper. The difference in sentiment is so profound because the beings about which the accounts speak differ greatly; the 'Congress' is one thing, 'our fathers' are almost another reality. The proposition that all men are created free and equal, to which the fathers dedicated their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor, and which for their children is to be the object of a new devotion, seems to belong to a different order of ideas than that to which the vague and useless, barren truism or delusion belongs. Though these various terms point to the same ultimate realities the later are seen in different aspects and apprehended in different contexts. Moreover it seems evident that the terms the external historian employs are not more truly descriptive of the things-in-themselves than those the statesman uses and that the former's understanding of what really happened is not more accurate than the latter's. In the one case the events of history are seen from outside, in the other from inside. Lincoln spoke of what happened in *our* history, of what had made and formed us and to which we remain committed so long as we continue to exist as Americans; he spoke of purposes which lie in our enduring past and are therefore the purposes of our present life; he described the history of living beings and not data relating to dead things. It is a critical history but the criticism of its author is not directed toward the general propositions so much as to the human beings who measure themselves and are measured by means of those general propositions; criticism is moral, directed toward selves and their community. The other account abstracts from living selves with their resolutions and commitments, their hopes, and fears. It is not critical of men but of things; documents and propositions are its objects. The events it describes happened in impersonal time and are recorded less in the memories of persons than in books and monuments.²²³

This quote shows Niebuhr's classification of history. Neither internal nor external history is understood to be *truer* than the other, nor less critical. Internal history deals with persons and communities as its objects and seeks to understand and be critical of them; external history deals with "ideas, interests, movements among things", it

²²³ (Niebuhr 1941), 45-46.

deals with people as “impersonal parts,”²²⁴ it deals with documents and seeks to understand and criticise them in the light of their relations and effects. Internal history is *our* history, it is personal and describes what has *made* and *formed* us and our community; external history is impersonal, it discusses events and describes how various factors led to the Declaration of Independence being written. Internal history criticises persons and communities who belong to it on the bases of their commitment and actions; external history criticises things, such as documents and propositions, on the basis of clarity and effect. Both are based on the same *ultimate* reality – the Declaration of Independence is one document not two, it is not one for external history and a different one for internal. One interprets a given part of, for lack of a better term, ultimate reality from one’s point of view – externally, where one describes an event objectively and in connection with other events, or internally, where one describes an event as part of one’s being or community. Neither is more or less valid than the other and both belong together. Niebuhr summarises the difference:

From the realistic point of view we are concerned in external history to abstract from all that is merely secondary, from subjective and partisan accounts of what happened; we seek to set forth the primary characteristics of each event as these may be defined by taking into account the reports of eye-witnesses, of contemporary documents and those ‘permanent possibilities of sensation,’ the enduring institutions, the constant movements of mind and will available to the experience of all participants. In internal history on the other hand we are not concerned with the primary and secondary elements of external historical perception but with ‘tertiary qualities,’ with values. These are not private and evanescent as the secondary elements are but common and verifiable in a community of selves; yet they are not objective in the sense in which the primary qualities of external perception are said to be objective.²²⁵

The difference between external and internal history is essential for Niebuhr’s method of understanding history from a Christian perspective. Persons seek to understand their history by looking for interconnections between various events. Niebuhr defines the centre of meaning, that which unifies our history and allows us to make sense of it, as “god”: “To be a self is to have a god; to have a god is to have

²²⁴ (Niebuhr 1941), 47.

²²⁵ (Niebuhr 1941), 48-49

a history, that is, events connected in a meaningful pattern; to have one god is to have one history.”²²⁶ Most people are polytheists; that is, they have different gods in different situations. Other people are henotheists who take a finite element of their experience and make it their god. This finite element can be a social structure, such as the nation or culture, any element of a given culture, such as democracy or human rights, or a finite object, such as fundamentalist Christians who make the understanding of the Bible as inerrant the standard of judgement. This object is limited and excludes large portions of the world. Christians, however, are radical monotheists in that they have one God in all situations. The source for our knowledge about God is revelation, which is an event of our inner history:

When Christians speak of revelation they point to history not as this can be known by external observers but as it is remembered by participating selves. Yet revelation does not simply mean inner history as a whole nor any arbitrarily chosen part of it.

There are many obscure elements in remembered history which are neither intelligible in themselves nor illuminative of other elements... The question why I am I, in this here and now, conditioned by and dependent on this body, and the equally difficult questions communities must raise about themselves indicate obscurities which reveal nothing. They must be illuminated themselves if there is to be anything that can be called revelation.

The event that illumines all others is revelation:

Revelation means for us that part of our inner history which illuminates the rest of it and which is in itself intelligible.²²⁷

Therefore, revelation is the event in our personal history that enables us to understand our whole history.

The imagination plays a vital role in this use of revelation – both in the natural sciences (objective history) and in the personal, internal history. The imagination is used to apply our ideas to our sensory data in order to make sense out of it - “So we may apprehend the meaning of a brown, rough texture of certain size and shape as the bark of a tree, or even as an adaptation of life to its environment.”

²²⁶ (Niebuhr 1941), 59.

²²⁷ (Niebuhr 1941), 67-68.

This use of the imagination is essential: “In such knowing of things, everything depends upon the continuous conversation between sensation and imagination.”²²⁸

The imagination is also vital in making sense of our internal history, in looking for meaning in all of our various experiences. It is thus an essential element of our existence. Imagination can be good or evil:

Evil imaginations in this realm are shown to be evil by their consequences to selves and communities just as erroneous concepts and hypotheses in external knowledge are shown to be fallacious by their results. Some instances of evil imaginations of the heart will assist toward the clarification of the relationship between imagination and reason in this sphere. In various forms of insanity imagination and reason are not lacking but wrong images are employed by reason... The images are false; his interpretations are unsupported by what other members of his community experience; hence he cuts himself off and is cut off from commerce with others and retires at last into the frustrations of utter solitude. The case is similar with all those feelings of superiority and inferiority which blight the lives of men... Again the image of the depraved race, now in the form of a Semitic, now of a Germanic, now of a Negro, now of a Japanese people, is used for the interpretation of social and individual sorrow. These are evil imaginations, resulting in continued conflict, in the impoverishment and destruction of selves both as agents and as sufferers... The images vary from day to day, from person to person. **Arbitrariness** and **isolated subjectivity** are the characteristic features of the world of selves understood by means of these imaginations of the heart.²²⁹

The use of imagination is evil when the consequences are evil and are characterised by a too narrow definition, or “us versus them (me versus the world)” mentality. This egotism characterises the way in which one apprehends and understands the afflictions that an individual experiences in the world. “In religion the joys and sorrows of the soul are referred to God as their source but God is thought to cause joy and sorrow purely because of his pleasure or displeasure in the self.”²³⁰

Everything is determined in an “I-thou” way of thinking, but only the “I” is known. These kinds of images are insufficient to make sense out of our “history and fate.”

²²⁸ (Niebuhr 1941), 71.

²²⁹ (Niebuhr 1941), 73-74. Emphasis mine.

²³⁰ (Niebuhr 1941), 74.

“When we reason with their aid most sufferings and joys remain unintelligible. Evil and selfhood are left as mysteries.”²³¹

One way to try to escape this kind of egotism is to eliminate the idea of the self from ones “image.” That forces a person to have a mechanistic view of the world, relying on viewing history externally. One sees a criminal as an object of forces within history or the society. There can therefore be no praise or blame for any person or group - they exist due to the forces of the world. This way of thinking is fruitful, as it deals with an “inescapable” element in “all responsible dealing with persons and communities,” but

...that the mechanical or at least impersonal model of the observer is a myth when used primarily or exclusively in understanding and responding to selves two considerations indicate quite clearly. 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 leaves large areas of our experience unrationalized and uncontrolled.²³²

Thus: “the patterns which pure or scientific reason employs in understanding the behaviour of things are inapplicable to the personal sphere.”²³³ However: “there is an image neither evil nor inadequate which enables the heart to understand and the event through which that image is given them Christians call revelation.”²³⁴

Revelation

Niebuhr wrote:

By revelation in our history, then, 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... Such revelation is no substitute for reason, the illumination it supplies does not excuse the mind from labor; but it does give to that mind the impulsion and the first principles it requires if it is to be able to do its proper work. In this sense we may say that the

²³¹ (Niebuhr 1941), 75.

²³² (Niebuhr 1941), 76.

²³³ (Niebuhr 1941), 79.

²³⁴ (Niebuhr 1941), 80.

revelatory moment is revelatory because it is rational, because it makes the understanding of order and meaning in personal history possible.²³⁵

Using revelation to interpret history has three important results:

1. This revelation makes our past **intelligible**. It is an occasion that shows the meaning of what we thought was merely haphazard. It gives meaning to our history. For the Christian Church, Jesus Christ is the revelatory occasion that enables us to make sense of our past – the revelation in Jesus Christ makes not only his own Jewish past intelligible to us, but also the whole past, “for the Christian church the whole past is potentially a single epic.”²³⁶
2. This revelation forces us to **remember** things that we have chosen to forget - uncomfortable parts of our past. As a result of revelation, we must confess that they also belong to our history, and then we must repent of these events.
3. **Appropriation**: all human past becomes part of our past through Jesus Christ: the Jewish past and the Gentile, in all its varieties, becomes our past.

This past is not an external object, but is internal and personal, it is *our* past, that which makes us who we are today. Since that is true, we cannot exclude any part of the past:

To remember all that is in our past and so in our present is to achieve unity of self. To remember the human past as our own past is to achieve community with mankind... Through Jesus Christ Christians can and must turn again and again to history, making the sins and the faiths of their fathers and brothers their own faiths and sins.²³⁷

This “conversion” of the past is an ongoing revolution, because the past is infinite and because sin – the attempt to cut ourselves off from any part of human history – is always entering the present. Revelation does not do the work of conversion, the “reasoning heart” must “search out memory and bring to light forgotten deeds.” However, without revelation this task seems to be impossible

²³⁵ (Niebuhr 1941), 80.

²³⁶ (Niebuhr 1941), 82.

²³⁷ (Niebuhr 1941), 86.

Humanity suffers from the same sin with regard to the present as to the past – the placing of the self at the centre. Here, too, Jesus Christ provides a radical reorientation away from the self:

Through the cross of Christ we gain a new understanding of the present scene; we note relations previously ignored; find explanations of our actions hitherto undreamed of. Deeds and sufferings begin to compose themselves into a total picture of significant action in which the self no longer occupies the center.²³⁸

The life and death of Christ provides a parable and analogy of our present experience. This is shown in Niebuhr's understanding of World War Two:

We see through the use of the great parable how bodies are being broken for our sake and how for the remission of our sins the blood of innocents is being shed. Not with complete clarity, to be sure, yet as in a glass darkly, we can discern in the contemporary confusion of our lives 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. We learn to know what we are doing and what is being done to us – how by an infinite suffering of the eternal victim we are condemned and forgiven at the same time; how an infinite loyalty refuses to abandon us either to evil or to nothingness, but works at our salvation with a tenacity we are tempted to deplore. The story of Jesus, and particularly of his passion, is the great illustration that enables us to say, "What we are now doing and suffering is like this."²³⁹

We not only use the revelatory event as a parable or analogy, but also as a rational image by means of which we can not only know what current actions and sufferings are *like* but also what they *are*:

The revelatory moment now is not itself the rational image but affords opportunity for the discovery of concepts of great generality whereby we are enabled to explain contemporary action in the moral or personal realm. Revelation now is concentrated in doctrines and it seems possible to state these without reference to the historic occasion in which they first became evident. As in natural science it is not necessary to remember the person of Newton and the incidents of his life in order that the theory of gravity may be employed, so it would appear that in theology we do not need to use the historic event in order to apply ideas which have become evident through it

²³⁸ (Niebuhr 1941), 90.

²³⁹ (Niebuhr 1941), 91.

but are independent of it. Theology, thinking in this fashion, is then inclined to identify revelation with the publication in an historic moment of great doctrines or ideas.²⁴⁰

This presents a dilemma for revelation – either revelation means the ideas through which we understand the present situation, or revelation means the historic occasion and cannot explain the present situation *except* by means of analogy or parable. The dilemma loses some force, according to Niebuhr, when one remembers that

... the reality we are dealing with and trying to understand is our history, in which we seek less for uniformities of behavior than for a principle of unity in duration. Concepts which describe the recurrent features in events are necessary for that external contemplation of our lives to which we return frequently in order that we may put checks on the inner imagination. But the real work of reason in our history is that of understanding in terms of persons, communities and values what we are doing and suffering. In this history, time is duration and unrepentive in character. Here we try to understand, not how features in our past are repeated in our present, but *how our present grows out of our past into our future.*²⁴¹

One uses the image provided by revelation to “make sense” out of the present and to understand “whither” one is going. Not in the sense of “it happened thusly at the moment of revelation, I must therefore do exactly the same.” Rather, “this is what was considered at the revelatory moment, I must also consider that. Their goal at that time was this, this is how they went about reaching it, what is the relation of my goal to that goal? How can I use what I have learned from the moment of revelation here and now?”

So when we interpret our present experience by means of revelation we return to a critical point in man’s conversation with God and try to understand the present as a continuation from that beginning.²⁴²

Revelation, in addition to enabling us to understand our past and present, also enables us to understand our future:

²⁴⁰ (Niebuhr 1941), 92.

²⁴¹ (Niebuhr 1941), 93. Emphasis mine.

²⁴² (Niebuhr 1941), 95.

We reason in our hearts in order that we may know the whither as well as the whence and where of our personal lives. If the past in inner history is what we are and the present what we do, our future is our potentiality.²⁴³

Revelation shows the mortality of groups and individuals – neither person, nor group lasts forever. At the same time, revelation also shows in Jesus Christ the possibility of resurrection. No one can promise an easy life without catastrophes or death, in fact, that is an essential part of life. Yet, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ God shows the “possibility of the resurrection of a new and other self, of a new community, a reborn remnant.”

Revelation is progressive for Niebuhr, as it is validated and modified through human experience. There are two different grades of revelation: the first is that event that provided what Niebuhr called the starting point. As this starting point is used in our experience to interpret events, that interpretation and the events themselves become a part of revelation:

A revelation which furnishes the practical reason with a starting point for the interpretation of past, present and future history is subject to progressive validation. The more apparent it becomes that the past can be understood, recovered and integrated by means of a reasoning starting with revelation, the more contemporary experience is enlightened and response to new situations aptly guided by this imagination of the heart, the more a prophesy based on this truth is fulfilled, the surer our conviction of its reality becomes... Revelation was not only validated but every new event and every reinterpreted memory became a part of revelation since in all events the same Lord appeared and was known of men. So history based on revelation became a history of revelation.²⁴⁴

Revelation is validated in the individual Christian whenever she or he understands new occasions by the aid of that revelation. That “use” of revelation becomes a part then of the revelation for future generations. Every moment understood by means of revelation becomes a part of the revelation itself. This is not a change of that “first principle” but one discovers more fully what that revelation means to them then and there. This present validation of revelation is why we believe that the past “event” was a revelatory one:

²⁴³ (Niebuhr 1941), 95.

²⁴⁴ (Niebuhr 1941), 97.

... [the heart] does not really know what is in the revelation, in the illumining moment, save as it proceeds from it to present experience and back again from experience to revelation. In that process the meaning of the revelation, its richness and power, grow progressively clearer. This progressive understanding of revelation is also an infinite process.²⁴⁵

Therefore, revelation is a past event that is re-understood in the present and used in the present to understand the current situation. Every time that occurs, one does not reinvent revelation, but understands it more deeply. And every application of revelation becomes a part of revelation itself.

This point shows one of the essential differences between Niebuhr and Barth. For Niebuhr, this use of revelation provides a place for apologetics, as revelation is verified through experience. The apologetic question is whether or not a revelation provides adequate means to interpret our experience. For Barth, there is no place for apologetics in Christian theology. We shall return to this point later.

Checks on the images we use to interpret events and act in response to them, what in the Christian tradition is called revelation, are communal and practical. They are communal in that the understanding and actions based on that revelation are examined by those who share in our internal history and those who have experienced similar or the same phenomena to be adequate or inadequate; the “interpretations are unsupported by what other members of his community experience; hence he cuts himself off and is cut off from commerce with others and retires at last into the frustration of utter solitude.”²⁴⁶ They are also judged by those external to our community on the basis of the results of understanding the phenomenon in this way by the means of a specific revelation. Niebuhr wrote:

The question which is relevant for the life of the self among selves is not whether personal images should be employed but only what personal images are right and adequate and which are evil imaginations of the heart. Evil imaginations in this realm are shown to be evil by their consequences to selves and communities just as erroneous concepts and hypothesis in external knowledge are shown to be fallacious by their results.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ (Niebuhr 1941), 100.

²⁴⁶ (Niebuhr 1941), 73.

²⁴⁷ (Niebuhr 1941), 73.

The practical checks are as discussed above:

1. The images we use to understand and respond to the world must make that world – past, present and future – intelligible. This includes that the images must force us to remember parts of our past which we have suppressed: “When we use insufficient and evil images of the personal or social self we drop out of consciousness or suppress memories which do not fit in with the picture of the self we cherish...”²⁴⁸
2. These images must lead to better integration of the self with his or her own community, as discussed above.
3. These images must not result in continued conflict with others inside and outside of our community: “These are evil imaginations, resulting in continued conflict, in the impoverishment and destruction of selves both as agents and as sufferers.”²⁴⁹

The more these criteria are met and fulfilled, the more revelation is used to make sense of the past and present and to help us plan for the future, the more convinced we become of its truth.

God’s Action in History

God’s activity in history remains a question for H. Richard Niebuhr: if we interpret history by means of God’s action in it, does that mean that God causes the events to happen? Is Niebuhr a fatalist? H. Richard Niebuhr’s first writings on war involved him in a debate with his brother Reinhold concerning the Manchurian crisis. This debate took place in the pages of the *Christian Century* and is helpful for understanding H. Richard Niebuhr’s view of God’s action within history.

²⁴⁸ (Niebuhr 1941), 83

²⁴⁹ (Niebuhr 1941), 74.

In September 1931, a Japanese army, apparently without the approval of the Japanese Imperial government, invaded Manchuria. By the end of November, they had conquered the entire region. As a result of the army's conquest, the Japanese government drafted the "Outline of Principles for the Solution to the China Position," which stated that Mongolia and Manchuria would be made an essential part of the empire. The debate that this caused in the United States concerned what, if anything, the United States ought to do as a response to the Japanese aggression. There were three main options: non-intervention, third-party intervention with or without allied support or economic sanctions against Japan. H. Richard Niebuhr argued in the *Christian Century* the non-interventionist position, while his brother Reinhold responded for the interventionist point-of-view.

In "The Grace of Doing Nothing," H. Richard argues for a pragmatic ethic, writing:

When we have begun a certain line of action or engaged in a conflict we cannot pause too long to decide which of various possible courses we ought to choose *for the sake of the worthier result*. Time rushes on and we must choose as best we can, entrusting the issue to the future. It is when we stand aside from the conflict, before we know what our relations to it really are, when we seemed condemned to doing nothing, that our moral problems become greatest. How shall we do nothing?²⁵⁰

One must therefore choose on the basis of the expected result a given action should have. This clearly locates H. Richard in the pragmatic tradition of ethics.

However, in this case, Niebuhr wrote, "there is nothing constructive, it seems, that we can do."²⁵¹ There appear to be two main reasons why the United States should not intervene. Firstly, the circumstances are such that no meaningful intervention is possible. We attempt to accomplish something, in that we "pass resolutions, aware that we are doing nothing; summon up righteous indignation and still do nothing; we write letters to congressmen and secretaries, asking others to act while we do nothing."²⁵² Secondly, any action taken by the United States would be less than "moral." He wrote:

²⁵⁰ (Niebuhr 1932), 6. Emphasis mine.

²⁵¹ (Niebuhr 1932) 6.

²⁵² (Niebuhr 1932), 6.

The Christian reflects upon the fact that his inability to do anything constructive in the crisis is the inability of one whose own faults are so apparent and so similar to those of the offender that any action on his part is not only likely to be misinterpreted but is also likely – in the nature of the case – to be really less than disinterested.²⁵³

We are therefore not called to act in judgement on Japan; indeed, Niebuhr nowhere in this article discusses the morality of the Japanese conquest of Manchuria. The question is rather about how we should do nothing. Niebuhr argues that we must attempt to respond to the Manchurian crisis with “meaningful inactivity.” He outlines five “ways,” of doing nothing: There are the *pessimists*, who believe the world is going to pieces anyway. Since all attempts to affect the world are by definition going to fail, the best course is to do nothing. This is a destructive form of doing nothing, as the world falls apart more quickly if no one does anything. There is also a *conservative* way of doing nothing, practised by those who believe in things as they are. The law of the world is self-interest. The Japanese acted solely out of self-interest, we must wait for our opportunity to assert our will. This form of doing nothing encourages further nations and persons to live by the “law” of self-assertion. There is also the inactivity of those who have *renounced violent methods* for resolving conflicts, including the pacifists. Niebuhr likens this position to a person on the street waiting for the police to arrive while a bully attacks someone. The police never do arrive; so either one has a heart attack or enters the conflict violently. This entry can be very dangerous, as Niebuhr warned: “Righteous indignation, not allowed to issue in action, is a dangerous thing – as dangerous as any great emotion nurtured and repressed at the same time. It is the source of sudden explosions or the ground of long, bitter and ugly hatreds.”²⁵⁴ The final alternative to Christian inactivity, which is also the most similar, is *communism*. It recognises that there may be nothing to do, yet remains hopeful as “this situation is after all preliminary to a radical change which will eliminate the conditions of which the conflict is a product.”²⁵⁵ This cynicism, which sees capitalism as evil and inherently causing conflict, is combined with an almost boundless hope in the future which will be

²⁵³ (Niebuhr 1932), 10.

²⁵⁴ (Niebuhr 1932), 8.

²⁵⁵ (Niebuhr 1932), 8.

brought about through the conflicts of the present. Niebuhr then summarises the *Christian* way of doing nothing:

But there is yet another way of doing nothing. It appears to be highly impracticable because it rests on the well-nigh obsolete faith that there is a God – a real God. Those who follow this way share with communism the belief that the fact that men can do nothing constructive is no indication of the fact that nothing constructive is being done. Like the communists they are assured that *the actual processes of history will inevitably and really bring a different kind of world with lasting peace*. They do not rely on human aspirations after ideals to accomplish this end, but on forces that often *seem* very impersonal – as impersonal as those which eliminated slavery in spite of the abolitionists. The forces may be as impersonal and as actual as machine production, rapid transportation, the physical mixture of the races, etc., but as parts of the real world they are as much a part of the total divine process as are human thoughts and prayers²⁵⁶

There are two main difference between Christian inactivity to communist: firstly, the Christian realises that they also are sinners, whose faults are so similar and obvious that any attempt to act in judgement against Japan will be misinterpreted. Secondly, Christians believe that, although these forces often *seem* impersonal, they are not. Rather God is in history, shaping the future to bring about the Kingdom of God. It is important to note that H. Richard is not saying that God occasionally intervenes in history to guide it toward its proper goal. Reinhold Niebuhr misunderstood his brother at just this point, when he wrote in his response to “The Grace of Doing Nothing” that

It is plausible also to interpret both the evolutionary and the catastrophic elements in history in religious terms and to see the counsels of God in them. But it is hardly plausible to expect divine intervention to introduce something into history which is irrelevant to anything we find in history now... My brother does not like these goals above and beyond history. He wants religion and social idealism to do with history. In that case he must not state his goal in absolute terms. There can be nothing absolute in history, *no matter how frequently God may intervene in it.*²⁵⁷

²⁵⁶ (Niebuhr 1932), 9

²⁵⁷ (Niebuhr 1932), 16, 18. Emphasis mine.

Reinhold Niebuhr has misunderstood his brother on this point. H. Richard does not argue that God occasionally or even frequently intervenes in history to maintain God's telos. He rather argues that God "is always in history; he is the structure in things, the source of all meaning, the 'I am that I am,' that which is that it is... that structure of the universe, that creative will, can no more be said to interfere brutally in history than the violated laws of my organism can be said to interfere with brutally with my life if they make me pay the cost of my violation."²⁵⁸ Thus, Christians ought to look for what God is doing within the structures of history itself and respond fittingly to that.

The United States ought to respond to the Japanese conquest of Manchuria with a "rigid self-analysis." This self-analysis will lead to the conclusion that Japan is doing the same thing as the United States had done in the past. The question is therefore what we ought to do in light of the fact that we have committed the same sins as Japan. The goal is to "create the conditions under which a real reconstruction of habits is possible."²⁵⁹ This way of doing nothing is what "old Christians called repentance, but the word has become so reminiscent of emotional debauches in the feeling of guilt that it may be better to abandon it for a while. What is suggested is that the only effective approach to the problem of China and Japan lies in the sphere of an American self-analysis which is likely to result in some surprising discoveries as to the amount of renunciation of self-interest necessary on the part of this country and of individual Christians before anything effective can be done in the east."²⁶⁰

It is important to note that Niebuhr is not a pacifist on principle here. He is not arguing that, because all nations are guilty of the same types of sins as the current belligerent nations, no nation is ever to go to war. He is rather arguing that, in this specific situation it seems that nothing constructive can be done. The question is then how do we respond here and now to this specific situation; what is the fitting response? As we are, according to Niebuhr, in a situation where we can do nothing constructive, the question is what characteristics ought our inactivity to have.

Niebuhr described this inactivity in this way:

²⁵⁸ (Niebuhr 1932), 20.

²⁵⁹ (Niebuhr 1932), 11.

²⁶⁰ (Niebuhr 1932), 11.

The inactivity of radical Christianity is not the inactivity of those who call evil good; it is the inaction of those who do not judge their neighbors because they cannot fool themselves into a sense of superior righteousness. It is not the inactivity of a resigned patience, but of a patience that is full of hope, and is based on faith. It is not the inactivity of the non-combatant, for it knows that there are no non-combatants, that everyone is involved, that China is being crucified (though the term is very inaccurate), by our sins and those of the whole world. It is not the inactivity of the merciless, for works of mercy must be preformed though they are only palliatives to ease present pain while the process of healing depends on deeper, more actual and urgent forces.²⁶¹

We are thus to be hopefully inactive, repenting of our own sins in preparation of God's activity in bringing about God's kingdom. Our response must not be one of judging the Japanese; rather, our attitude must be one of repentance. We must remember that God's kingdom will come about because of God's activity, not our own. Indeed, it will come about in spite of our own actions, as slavery was abolished in spite of the activity of the abolitionists. This seems to leave Niebuhr open to the Marxist critique that religion is an opiate of the masses – telling them to suffer in silence waiting for God to act. However, Niebuhr is not arguing that a nation must never act militarily in principle, but that in this specific instance the United States can do nothing meaningful. In this case, therefore, the question is how ought the United States do nothing.

Niebuhr's case is premised on the idea that God is active in history. With regards to war, he argued that this belief in God's activity differentiates the religious objectivists from the subjectivists. He wrote:

I must not enter here into a discussion of the meaning of Jesus save to say that I cannot begin, as religious subjectivism does, with the Fourth Gospel, but must start with the Synoptics and with a Jesus who finds God's action not within himself but in objective, natural and historical events. Here is an issue which goes very deep. Whether we approach the war [World War Two] as religious subjectivists or as religious objectivists makes a profound difference to action as well as to thought. As objectivists, we must begin with the initial assumption that there is no event in which divine reason and will are not involved, which must not be understood with the aid of the grand Christian postulate, no matter how difficult the inquiry, and in which we are not required to respond to the universal, no matter how revolutionary for thought and action that demand may be. As subjectivists, we shall look for God's

²⁶¹ (Niebuhr 1932), 11.

action within, and will judge the world *with* him rather than be placed under the judgment of objective reality.²⁶²

This “initial assumption” that God is active in all events is of central importance for Niebuhr’s social ethics concerning war, to which we now turn.

Niebuhr’s General Theory of the Ethics of War

H. Richard Niebuhr classifies traditional Christian theories of war into two different categories: amoral theories and moral theories. Amoral theories assume that victory in war is a matter of force, with the stronger side winning. The moral justice or injustice of a given position in a conflict is irrelevant to the success of that position. Moral argument may play a part, but only as a means used by those in power to cloak their true motives, to enflame the people’s emotions and to unify the people in times of war. The victor in any conflict is determined not by any type of moral justice, but by force, by armies, be they military or economic. Balance-of-power total war theorists who believe that, when national interest is at stake, total war is called for, as well as certain types of pacifists, who believe that, since the victor in war is solely determined by strength and not by moral justice, it is to be avoided at all costs, fall into this group.

Moral theories of war, on the other hand, believe that war is an event that occurs in a universe “in which the laws of retribution hold sway.”²⁶³ According to this type of argument, war begins with a violation of law – be it international or national, human or divine – and then continues as the law’s upholders seek to punish the offending nation. There is therefore a distinction between moral and immoral use of force, between just and unjust war. The most prominent example of this model is the traditional just-war theory, but also certain types of total-war theorists²⁶⁴ who believe that they must punish other nations for their transgressions.

²⁶² (Aldrich 1942), 60.

²⁶³ (Niebuhr 1943), 64.

²⁶⁴ This position is related to what was known, prior to the modern era, as the crusade See (Bainton 1960).

These types of theories are based on the assumption that the universe is a moral system in which laws of retributive justice hold sway. One nation violates an international law, or an order of creation, or a divine law, and the just nation or nations have a moral obligation to punish the immoral nation, resulting in war. One side is using force *morally*, in response to another side using force *immorally*²⁶⁵. This assumes that one side is *wholly* justified while the other is *wholly* unjustified. Clearly, that is never the case. In Article 231 of the Versailles Treaty, Germany accepted sole guilt for the First World War, but their acceptance was not based on any historical analysis of the causes of that war, it came about only after Germany was defeated on the battlefield. This and the huge reparations Germany was required to pay to the victorious Allies were major causes of Hitler's rise to power, which led to the Second World War.²⁶⁶ Thus the victorious Allies of World War One shared in the responsibility for World War Two. International relations are far too complicated for this kind of understanding to function; the causes behind a situation that lead a nation to go to war are so complicated that assigning sole blame to one nation or group of nations is overly simplistic and morally dangerous. It may be that one side decided to use force in an unjust way in order to obtain what they believe they were unjustly denied in peace, but no nation is morally blameless.

This model also requires the assumption that the whole population of a country be guilty of the decision to go to war, as it is the whole population who will suffer the punishment of war. In fact, it is not the decision-makers, those who may actually be guilty of the "crime" of going to war who will suffer, but rather the non-combatants, the innocent, who will suffer. It was not Hitler and the Nazi government that suffered the most in World War II, as Niebuhr put it: "Retribution for the sins of a Nazi party and a Hitler falls on Russian and German soldiers, on the children of Cologne and Coventry, on the Finns and on the French."²⁶⁷ Not only does the population of the "unjust" country suffer, large portions of the population of the

²⁶⁵ This is precisely the argument Michael Walzer makes when he writes: "Most wars, as I argue in this book, are just on one side (the side that fights in self-defense)..." See (Walzer 1977), xii.

²⁶⁶ It is interesting to note that the Calhoun Commission report, "The Relation of the Church to the War in Light of the Christian Faith," in discussing the Second World War states: "The war that broke out in 1914 and has continued, with temporary and local interruptions, to the present moment – a thirty years' war..." *Social Action*, 9. We will be referring to this report more fully below.

²⁶⁷ (Niebuhr 1943), 65.

“just” country also suffer. Is it moral for a government to cause suffering amongst its own population for the transgression of another? Thus those who agree with moral understandings of war in theory are unable to follow them consistently in practise: “If they declare a present war to be just they must participate in inflicting suffering and death on the ‘just’ with the ‘unjust’; if they regard a present war as unjust they must stand idly by while the ‘just’ are being made to suffer with the ‘unjust.’”²⁶⁸

The other Christian response to war is pacifism, which can be traced back to the earliest church.²⁶⁹ One type of Christian pacifism, mentioned above, assumes that the decisive factor in determining victory in any conflict is not morality, but advantage in force (economic or military). Success is not based on the morality of a position, but solely on amoral factors. Moral phrases are tools of force that are used to gain support for a particular point of view, but morality plays no role in who will win the conflict. The leaders themselves are motivated not by the good or some moral argument, but by self-interest and the desire to maintain and extend their power and influence. Since morality plays no role in success or failure, Christians ought to separate themselves from the world and “keep their hands clean.”

It is true that the leaders of any country are to an extent motivated by self-interest, and use moral argument as one tool to win the support of their constituency. The use of propaganda by Nazi Germany, indeed by all the countries in World War II clearly demonstrates this. However, human beings are not merely rational beings, they are also moral beings. They fight a war to “defend the fatherland,” to protect our cultural heritage or for similar values. These beliefs or values may give strength to a country. These values are not rational, and, although they can be used by governments to further their own aims, they are true moral elements. The results of these elements in an individual as well as in societies can and do vary. One person in Nazi Germany fights in the Wehrmacht not because he believes in the Nazi ideology, nor because he is violently anti-Semitic, although these impulses may influence his decision to fight. He fights because he wants to defend his homeland. Another person living in Nazi Germany, who loves Germany as much as the soldier in the Wehrmacht, becomes involved in the German resistance to Hitler because he or she

²⁶⁸ (Niebuhr 1943), 65.

²⁶⁹ See (Bainton 1960) for a historical analysis of ethical theories of war and an apology for pacifism.

believes that a totalitarian regime is evil, or that the destruction of non-Aryan peoples is wrong and must be stopped, or merely that Hitler is bringing about the destruction of Germany and that this must be prevented²⁷⁰. A government uses these moral forces, but they cannot create them. They do attempt to channel these forces to bring about a desired effect, but they cannot succeed in doing so in their entire constituency. This was the case in Nazi Germany where, in spite of a highly developed propaganda ministry, many people had to be put into concentration camps because they refused to do what the government required of them. One may argue that individuals may be motivated by morality, but that governments are not²⁷¹. Governments are, however, made up of people so that, even though the moral influence may be reduced in a government, it is still present. It is true that the world is fallen and we cannot bring about the kingdom of God in the world. However, that does not mean that we should not try to make the world more just. We cannot give up on the world, because God does not give up on the world.

Another form of pacifism does not advocate total separation from the world but the opposite. Since war is evil, Christians must view war as a sin to be avoided at all costs. They must attempt to influence the government to reject the use of military force as a method for resolving conflict. Morality is not a private matter to be sought for apart from the “world,” it is a matter that affects the whole world, a goal for which the whole world ought to strive for and therefore governments also attempt to achieve. This point of view emphasises the evil of war and argues that it therefore must be avoided. War, and the killing and suffering that by nature must accompany it, are to be avoided whenever possible. However, this type of pacifism does not take the power of sin in the world seriously enough. In the kingdom of God, there will not be war, but we do not now live in this kingdom, nor can we bring it into being by our own effort. The unilateral renunciation of force may indeed lead to greater social injustice, as nations that do not reject the use of force gain in influence over those

²⁷⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer summarised the dilemma for Christians in his letter from 1939 to Reinhold Niebuhr explaining why he felt he had to return from the relative safety of the United States to Germany. He wrote: “Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make that choice in security...” See (Bethge 1967), 736f.

²⁷¹ As Reinhold Niebuhr does in his *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. See (Niebuhr 1932)

nations that do. Supporters for this type of pacifism may advocate other forms of non-violent resistance, such as the methods used by Gandhi in India. These methods have similar results to military force, as Reinhold Niebuhr in his book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* points out.²⁷² Gandhi's non-violent method of not buying cotton from Great Britain to fight against British colonialism caused much indiscriminate suffering in Manchester, where unemployment rose dramatically and parents could no longer afford to support their families. Another method also advocated is the use of embargoes. However, it is once again the innocent who suffers most, and this may even be counterproductive in trying to change a government's policy. The dictator argues that the suffering in their country is brought about not by the government policies, but as a result of the embargo against them. Although military confrontation is to be avoided whenever possible, the complete renunciation force may lead to greater injustice.

In light of the failure of moral and amoral understandings of war, Niebuhr argues for a different understanding of war based on God's revelation in Jesus Christ. The interpretation of events in history by means of revelation is central to H. Richard's theology and ethics, as discussed above.

World War Two

...Christian like Jewish interpretation of history centers in the conviction that God is at work in all events and the ethics of these monotheistic communities is determined by the principle that man's action ought always to be response to divine rather than to any finite action. Hence it is a sign of returning health when God rather than the self or the enemy is seen to be the central figure in the great tragedy of war and when the question 'What must I do?' is preceded by the question, 'What is God doing?'²⁷³

As the first question for ethics is, according to Niebuhr, what is happening?, we must begin discussion of World War Two with his understanding of what was happening. Answering the question of what is happening requires the use of many external sources of information and interpretation, including politics, psychology, sociology

²⁷² See pgs. 171f, for his discussion of the harmful effects of violent vs. non-violent means.

²⁷³ (Niebuhr 1942), 47.

and history. H. Richard's clearest statement concerning the situation of World War Two is found in the Calhoun Commission report, "The Relation of the Church to the War in Light of the Christian Faith."²⁷⁴ In December 1942 at the Biennial Meeting of the Federal Council of Churches in America, held in Cleveland, Ohio, a group of Christian scholars were commissioned to study and report on the relation of the church to the situation of war. This commission, chaired by Robert Calhoun, met 4 times between May 1943 and October 1944 and issued a report entitled "The Relation of the Church to the War in Light of the Christian Faith." The report was signed by all twenty-six members of the commission, including H. Richard Niebuhr.²⁷⁵ There were three subsections within the commission that looked at the empirical, the historical and the theological aspects of the problem. The subsection dealing with theological issues was chaired by H. Richard Niebuhr who prepared a preliminary study for the commission,²⁷⁶ as did the other two sub-chairs (Edwin E. Aubrey on empirical issues, Roland H. Bainton on historical).

The members of the commission were surprised at how much agreement there was between members with very different points of view on war itself. Samuel McCrea Cavert wrote in the foreword to the report in *Social Action*:

When the members of the Commission came together they found themselves holding widely different points of view with regard to the attitude if the individual Christian in the face of war. It has been a gratifying experience to discover how impressive a measure of agreement they have been able to attain on the basic underlying questions having to do with the Christian faith and the nature and function of the Christian Church.²⁷⁷

Within the report itself, the problem of dealing with differences between commission members is mentioned in the beginning of the document:

²⁷⁴ The report was published in complete in *Social Action Magazine*, Vol. X. Number 10, December 15, 1944. Excerpts have been published in (Miller 1992), 71-124 and in (1982). For a brief discussion of the writing of the report and the reception, see (Warren 1997), 110-112.

²⁷⁵ The signatories were: Edwin E. Aubrey, Roland H. Bainton, John C. Bennett, Conrad J. I. Bergendorff, B. Harvie Branscomb, Frank H. Caldwell, Robert Lowry Calhoun, Angus Dun, Nels F. S. Ferré, Robert E. Fitch, Theodore M. Greene, Georgia E. Harkness, Walter M. Horton, John Knox, Umphrey Lee, John A. Mackay, Benjamin E. Mays, John T. McNeill, H. Richard Niebuhr, Reinhold Niebuhr, William Pauck, Douglas V. Steere, Ernest Fremont Tittle, Henry P. Van Dusen, Theodore O. Wedel, Alexander C. Zabriskie.

²⁷⁶ (Niebuhr 1943), 159-173.

²⁷⁷ (Calhoun 1944), 3-4.

Where major differences have seemed to require explicit notice, we have tried to make that fact plain. That these differences (especially as between pacifist and non-pacifist members of the Commission) exist inside a more fundamental context of shared Christian faith, and of mutual understanding, mutual confidence, and readiness to learn, became clear in the course of our debates. That fact is itself one of the primary findings.²⁷⁸

Niebuhr's influence in the document is pronounced, although he was unable to comment extensively on or edit the final edition due to health problems. For the purposes of the following discussion, we will look at the Calhoun Commission Report to discuss some aspects of Niebuhr's understanding of war, pointing out differences between his own work and the report where necessary.

The method the committee used to discuss the current situation was very much influenced by Niebuhr:

There are thus three phases of the word the Church must speak to our time: diagnostic, doctrinal and practical. The three parts of this report attempt to deal successively with these interrelated demands. The first part is diagnostic: an attempt to make clear what seems to us the character of our present situation, and some of the major problems it raises concerning the relation of the Church, its gospel, and its members to the war. The second is doctrinal: a statement of those primary Christian affirmations that seem to us normative for any attempt to deal with the problems of the Church in war-time. The third is practical: a glance at the major attitudes toward war, past and present, that have actually been maintained in the Church as fitting expressions of Christian faith, and a summary of the attitudes that seem to us to accord best with that faith in our own day and for the near future.²⁷⁹

The commission interpreted the time as being a period of great transition; the war is an expression of this transition, in which "a life and death struggle is going on between various old ways of living and various new ones."²⁸⁰ The war is fought by various coalitions of nation-states, each seeking their own advantage at the expense of the other. The struggle involves

²⁷⁸ (Calhoun 1944), 6.

²⁷⁹ (Calhoun 1944), 8-9.

²⁸⁰ (Calhoun 1944), 9.

...a revolutionary attempt by each of the chief Axis powers to move toward world conquest and the establishment of a totalitarian 'New Order,' and a resolute struggle by their opponents to prevent such a totalitarian conquest and to keep the way open for more humane modes of life.²⁸¹

Within this context, two factors seem to the members to be of special importance: a sudden and violent reversal of the trend toward political democracy and an assault on the growth of "social democracy." It is the second factor that seems to be most important. These tendencies have occurred previously in somewhat different forms. What was new was the development of the sovereign national state. Modern nations controlled larger areas more effectively, which brought about greater stability than in the past more localised authorities were able to do. This, however, also led to more fragmentation among the peoples as each nation has gained in authority over its own people and made national concern the overriding issue. At the same time, the church fragmented so that there no longer is (if there ever truly was) a unifying, higher loyalty to Pope or Church amongst the peoples of Europe. In effect, the churches had become, to a greater or lesser extent, national churches where loyalty to a universal church is subordinated to national loyalties. As discussed above, Niebuhr terms this tendency to take finite elements of our experience and elevate them to our centre-of-value, henotheism. This can clearly be seen in the German Church struggle, where the German Christians attempted to meld Christianity with the German Völkish philosophy.²⁸² The leaders of the various Nation-States, taking advantage of this situation, claimed more and more the citizen's loyalty and claimed that loyalty more and more to the exclusion of all other loyalties.

Concurrent with this tendency to fragmentation, industrial and technological advances made isolationism less possible. Developments in production and transport had increased the size of markets required to keep economies stable:

... the worldwide depression of 1929-1932, and the rise of international cartels and of expansionist totalitarian programs bear eloquent testimony to

²⁸¹ (Calhoun 1944), 10-11. Emphasis original.

²⁸² There are many sources for information about the church struggle. See, for example: (Busch 1975), 213-336; (Bethge 1967), esp. 305-357; (Ericksen 1985).

the inability of nationalism in its traditional form to cope with the expansive pressures of modern industry and finance.²⁸³

In summary:

Our present situation is distinguished, then, by the clash of divisive national interests in a world physically entangled in the web of modern industry and commerce. There is no chance to restore the physical isolation of nations in time past. The only way out is to seek, by all suitable means, to transform our interlocked society into world community, in which great nations may have contributive rather than destructive roles.²⁸⁴

This ends the secular understanding of the events of World War Two. The next question concerns the distinctively Christian interpretation of the war:

In such understanding, the war is an event in the providential reign of God whom we know best through Christ crucified and triumphant. For Christian faith the whole cataclysm, having all the characters just noticed, is a tragic moment in God's work of creating and redeeming man, and in man's long struggle with himself and his creator. In this perspective, the opportunity and obligation implicit in the crisis appear more commanding, and its dangers not less real but less disheartening than they might well seem apart from Christian faith.²⁸⁵

H. Richard Niebuhr interpreted the Second World War by means of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, specifically, by means of two images from the Christian tradition: in 1942 he used the image of God's judgement in the "War as the Judgement of God,"²⁸⁶ and he used Jesus' crucifixion in his 1943 article "War as Crucifixion."²⁸⁷

It is important to note that it is at this point that Niebuhr's interpretation of war differs somewhat from the Calhoun Commission's report. The report begins, in agreement with Niebuhr's method, with the statement:

²⁸³ (Calhoun 1944), 14.

²⁸⁴ (Calhoun 1944), 15. Emphasis original.

²⁸⁵ (Calhoun 1944), 12. Emphasis original.

²⁸⁶ (Niebuhr 1942)92, 47-55.

²⁸⁷ Originally published in *The Christian Century*, April 28, 1943. It has been reprinted in (Niebuhr 1943). All references here are to the Miller edition.

The primary ground for a distinctive understanding of any situation is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.²⁸⁸

The commission also used, as Niebuhr did, two images from the Christian tradition to interpret war: judgement and crucifixion. Concerning judgement, the report states:

Divine judgment in the war can plainly be seen at two levels. First, as we have noted, there is a natural and moral order of creation that God maintains against all man's wayward efforts in peace and in war... Secondly, God's judgment in war time negates not merely the selfish conduct of war, but also their inadequate ideals for living... Is then war itself to be called a 'divine judgment,' or an instrument thereof? Does God decree war to punish the waywardness of men? We have said no. War is not divinely ordained, any more than slums or slavery. God's will is always that men shall live at peace with one another and with Him.²⁸⁹

Niebuhr, on the other hand, states:

But something has been gained as a result of the very general recognition that God is judging the nations, the churches and all mankind in this great conflict and crucifixion...

At the same time, Niebuhr is also aware of the danger of seeing war as divine judgement and therefore not as an event brought about by human action. He continues:

The conviction of sin, which the social gospel has brought about, and the old understanding of history, which Marxism has forced Christianity to remember, leave all Christians with a bad conscience in the presence of this struggle and with the recognition that men are reaping what they have sown.²⁹⁰

Most Christians, according to Niebuhr, understand the war as God's judgement in some sense. They fall into three main groups:

²⁸⁸ (Calhoun 1944), 22.

²⁸⁹ (Calhoun 1944), 34-35. Emphasis original.

²⁹⁰ (Niebuhr 1942), 48

1. Pacifists: war is a humanly made evil brought about by human sin. They work for a just peace but refuse to take part in the human evil of war.
2. War is a judgement of human evil, but citizens must defend their nation. Christians do not make war, but good citizens defend their country.
3. There is a distinction between the absolute judgement of God and the relative judgment of people. We respond to the absolute judgement of God by contrition, but assert our relative justice against the unjust enemy.

All three understandings are dualistic, responding to two different objects. The pacifist responds to God by working for justice, to human evil by non-participation; or as Christians we respond to God's judgment of human evil in war by contrition but as citizens we fight to defend our country; or we are contrite for our injustice compared to God but are confident of our justice in comparison with the enemy. For Niebuhr:

... the dualism of the double response is an intolerable one; it makes us 'double minded men, unstable in all our ways,' [James 1:8] ditheists who have two Gods, the Father of Jesus Christ and our country, or Him and Democracy, or Him and Peace. Country, Democracy, and Peace are surely values of a high order, if they are under God, but as rivals of God they are betrayers of life.²⁹¹

Properly understood, God's judgement must not be separated from redemption, as Niebuhr wrote in response to questions concerning his article "War as the Judgement of God:"

I was concerned to point out in the article in question that judgment in the Scriptures meant the corrective action of a God who is loyal to his creatures. The idea of emotionally motivated vengeance has little if any place in any effort to think straight on the subject.²⁹²

Therefore, war is not hell but purgatory; this is most clearly shown by the fact that, in war, it is the (relatively) innocent who suffer vicariously in war and not those who

²⁹¹ (Niebuhr 1942), 50

²⁹² Virgil C. Aldrich and H. Richard Niebuhr, "Is God in the War?" originally published in *The Christian Century*, August 5, 1942; reprinted in: (Niebuhr 1942). Aldrich addressed several questions in a letter to the editor of *The Christian Century* concerning Niebuhr's article and an editorial concerning the war that had appeared in the *Century*.

are responsible for the decision to go to war. If war is the judgment of God on humanity, then it is an absolute judgment on all humanity and the possibility of speaking of one's relative justice is excluded. God does use finite tools to judge, but the tool is not justified by God's use of it:

Hence response to divine judgment can never mean justification of either the enemy or of the self. Insofar as such justification is introduced the conviction about God's action is abandoned.²⁹³

In the same way as one nation is not excluded from God's judgment, so also one part of life is not excluded. It is not as if God judges everything except politics or democracy, so that we are contrite in response to this judgement where applicable, but fight to defend democracy. Thus God's action in the war is "redemptive and vicarious, absolute and unified."²⁹⁴

God's action in war, understood in this way, has three main consequences for our action. We must stop passing our own judgments on ourselves or on the enemy and "...simply inquire what duty we have to perform in view of what we have done amiss and in view of what God is doing."²⁹⁵ At the same time, we must also stop thinking of the self as central and reject all self-defensiveness and self-aggrandisement:

If we accept God's judgment on our self-centeredness we cannot respond to it by persisting in actions of self-defense and by fighting the war for the sake of protecting our selves or our values instead of for the sake of the innocent who must be delivered from the hands of the aggressor.²⁹⁶

Thirdly, when God's action is seen in war in this way, our response must be hopeful and trusting. God's judgement cannot be separated from redemption, so we can never give in to despair as if we or our enemy or the world is so depraved that there is no hope. We must refuse to give up on what God does not give up on.

In summary, Niebuhr wrote:

²⁹³ (Niebuhr 1942), 52.

²⁹⁴ (Niebuhr 1942), 53.

²⁹⁵ (Niebuhr 1942), 53.

²⁹⁶ (Niebuhr 1942), 54.

To recognize God at work in war is to live and act with faith in resurrection. If God were not in the war life would be miserable indeed. It would mean that the cosmos had no concern with justice. But if God were in the war only as judge, man's misery would be only slightly assuaged since before the judge all are worthy of death. To see God in the war as the vicarious sufferer and redeemer, who is afflicted in all the afflictions of his people, is to find hope along with broken-heartedness in the midst of disaster.²⁹⁷

The other crucial image Niebuhr uses to understand war is the image of Christ's crucifixion. According to Niebuhr, war is like crucifixion in two main ways. Firstly, there is a strange mixture of justice and injustice in both Jesus' crucifixion and in war. Three persons were crucified, all of whom were accused of insurrection. Two of these were actually guilty of insurrection, one was not, at least not in the same sense the other two were. Jesus did strive to bring in a new kingdom, yet also said "My kingdom is not from this world" (John 18:36). Of the two who were guilty, one was unrepentant, while the other recognised the relative justice of his punishment. And among those who crucified the three, there was a mixture of justice and injustice: "soldiers who did their duty in obedience to their oath, priests who acted according to their lights – though their light was darkness – a judge who failed in his duty, citizens who were devoted to the maintenance of the sacred values of Jewish culture, a mob overborne by emotion."²⁹⁸ In war it is also true that the motives of those leaders who decide to go to war are mixed – as were the motives of those who decided to crucify Jesus; some feel they are trying to serve their own country as best they can, some feel they need to protect their own traditions, and some feel that they are obeying their oath to serve their country's own interests. Those nations who fought for "righteousness" also played a major role in the situation that led to Hitler's rise to power and, eventually, to the war. Amongst the victims of the war are also those who are unrepentant, those who recognise the relative justice of their suffering, and those who are truly innocent. "War is like that – apparently indiscriminate in the choice of victims and victors, whether these be thought of as individuals or communities."²⁹⁹

²⁹⁷ (Niebuhr 1942), 55.

²⁹⁸ (Niebuhr 1943), 66.

²⁹⁹ (Niebuhr 1943), 66.

A second similarity between crucifixion and war is that neither of them can be fully understood in terms of a moral (retributive justice) system, nor by an amoral (might makes right) system. Both systems are inadequate to the task of explaining these events. If morality is based on retributive justice, or if the world is amoral, then, as Niebuhr puts it: “the cross would be the final demonstration of God’s injustice or, rather, of his non-existence.”³⁰⁰ If the universe is understood in terms of retributive justice, then the fact that Jesus was crucified implies that he was guilty of breaking some law, and was being punished for it. Otherwise, the system of retributive justice fails. If, on the other hand, we understand the world in an amoral sense, then Jesus’ crucifixion is irrelevant, merely another event in an amoral world where “might makes right.” Neither the cross nor war, however, is a case for moral indifference, rather the opposite is true: both events show the seriousness of our decisions, for good and for evil. The crucifixion shows that God will not abandon humanity to its own self-destruction: God chooses to sacrifice the Son of God, Jesus Christ “for the sake of the just and the unjust.” War also involves great sacrifice; parents also must sacrifice their children in war for causes or things that they love, that they believe in. Where great sacrifices are called for, there is no room for moral indifference.

The cross shows us that we live in a world of graciousness, rather than a world of retributive justice or an amoral world. The crucifixion is a demonstration of God’s righteousness, which is beyond any righteousness of the law, and shows that our ‘righteousness’ is as unrighteous as our unrighteousness. This means, as Niebuhr continued: “the whole effort to assess and judge the goodness and the evil of self and others, and to reward or punish accordingly, is mistaken.”³⁰¹

When we interpret war by the cross of Jesus Christ, our attention is focused on the suffering and death of the guiltless, which then becomes a call to repentance, to a spiritual revolution. This understanding of war does not lead to any new law for determining action, because the cross does not impose any new law, but demonstrates that all action based on this understanding of war will have one thing in common: “there will be in them no effort to establish a righteousness of our own, no

³⁰⁰ (Niebuhr 1943), 66.

³⁰¹ (Niebuhr 1943), 69.

excusing of self because one has fallen less short of the glory of God than others; there will be no vengeance in them.”³⁰² They will also share one positive aspect: they will be performed in hope, in reliance on the continued grace of God in the midst of our ungraciousness.”

The Calhoun commission did not go as far as Niebuhr in interpreting war by means of the crucifixion of Jesus. This interpretation is present, but only in a very qualified way. The commission stated:

Is war itself a Golgotha, and suffering humanity a new embodiment of the crucified Redeemer? In particular, can we say that the men killed in battle, or the refugees driven out to wander and starve, or the children who die in bomb shelters or blockaded famine areas are vicarious redeemers of our time? We share deeply in the desire of bereaved parents and comrades, and of chaplains and pastors to say these things, but they must not be said carelessly. *War is in a general sense a crucifixion of both man and God, but it is not the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and it is not a chief source of man's salvation. What made the tragedy on Calvary uniquely redemptive was the Man on the middle cross, and the unmixed revelation of love and power that was in him...* Let the Church, then, say that in the light of the Crucifixion we see more deeply and clearly the meaning of the present struggle. We see that in our world, the burden of suffering is not distributed according to guilt and innocence, but that all suffer, even the best.³⁰³

The members of the commission wanted to avoid any identification of our vicarious suffering in war with the unique vicarious suffering of Jesus Christ as source of our salvation. Niebuhr would agree with this sentiment, although went further with the identification of Jesus' suffering with the human suffering in war. Jesus suffering and death on the cross is the

...final, convincing demonstration of the fact that the order of the universe is not one of retribution in which goodness is rewarded and evil punished, but rather an order of graciousness wherein, as Jesus had observed, the sun is made to shine on evil and on good and the rain to descend on the just and the unjust.³⁰⁴

³⁰² (Niebuhr 1943), 70.

³⁰³ (Calhoun 1944), 39. Emphasis original.

³⁰⁴ (Niebuhr 1943), 68.

As Jesus suffered and died vicariously for humanity and as a result of human sinfulness on Calvary, so too war

...is Calvary, the place of vicarious suffering and death. Here individuals die for the sake of communities, because of the transgressions of nations... [I]t is exactly at this point that the action of God, the Father of Jesus Christ, is most apparent in war, for this is the way of his working which was made evident in the cross of Christ. He gives his best-beloved rather than to allow the work of his creation to dissolve into the anarchy of existence which can recognize no order, to decay internally. The intense seriousness of the love of God, as revealed in Jesus Christ's death, is confirmed and recalled and illustrated and re-enacted in the vicarious suffering of war.³⁰⁵

Thus war is crucifixion not only in that we can use the crucifixion of Jesus to better understand it, but also in that God's love is demonstrated in it in God's maintaining of order throughout the chaos of war. Through our understanding war by means of Jesus' crucifixion, we not only gain a better understanding of war and God's action in it but also a better understanding of Jesus crucifixion.

Niebuhr's belief that Christian duty "involves... resistance to those who are abusing our neighbours"³⁰⁶ provides a *guideline* for determining action in war. It is important to note that this is not a principle that must be fulfilled in order for the act of going to war to be justified. Rather, it is a guideline for interpreting events and making a decision concerning the various courses of action open to a person. For Niebuhr, this guideline involves the amount of suffering for the innocent. Niebuhr, unlike Barth, does not give us many clear statements of his position concerning the Axis and the Allies. One clear statement, from the Calhoun Commission report states:

In the actual course of events, dominance by the Axis powers would have fastened upon their own peoples and upon the conquered lands a reign of tyranny and terror full of danger to humane living everywhere. Resistance to such rule, whether by armed force or by more peaceful means, became imperative. We speak here with keen awareness of the confusions of human motives, the mingling of good with base intents, the differences among striving human groups that mark each new situation in history. We have in view at the same time the certainty that our own judgment of all these matters

³⁰⁵ (Niebuhr 1943), 166-167.

³⁰⁶ (Niebuhr 1942), 53.

is biased and incomplete. Yet one judgment concerning the years of uneasy truce seems clear. Every nation then was concerned more for the immediate advantage of self than for the larger welfare of mankind and for the glory of God as Lord of all. Every nation, moreover, thus jeopardized even its own well-being, along with that of its neighbors, since none can long prosper alone.³⁰⁷

This is very close to a statement found in Niebuhr's article:

Instead of asking whether we are right people or wrong people we shall simply inquire what duty we have to perform in view of what we have done amiss and in view of what God is doing. If that duty involves, as I believe it does, resistance to those who are abusing our neighbors, we shall not inquire whether our neighbors are not better people than those who are abusing them. In social life our duty frequently requires us to protect neighbors whom we dislike against the injustices of those whom we like and who on the whole seem to us to be better people than their victims are. The same principle applies in the affairs of the society of nations.³⁰⁸

This is as close as Niebuhr comes to a principle for deciding whether or not to go to war. This guideline must be based on an interpretation of what God is doing and in a spirit of repentance for our own sins. It is also independent of any moral judgment of the aggressors or the aggrieved. The emphasis is on our sinfulness and repentance. In war, we are being judged and called to repentance – we are not judging our enemy nor are we carrying out God's judgment. Rather, we are being judged together with our enemy and all of humanity.

Like Barth, Niebuhr rejects casuistic ethics in principle as anthropocentric. Ethics must be ground in God's activity and then, and only then, in human response to God's primary activity. The decision to go to war should, therefore, not be based on some moral decision based on a system of retributive justice. Nor should we, as Christians, say nothing, as if morality played no role in the world. In the situation of war, we see that it is the (relatively) innocent, "the children of Cologne and Coventry, on the Finns and on the French" who suffer in war. It is very difficult if not impossible to understand this crucial element of the experience of war by means of an understanding of the moral order of the universe in terms of retributive justice.

³⁰⁷ (Calhoun 1944), 50-51.

³⁰⁸ (Niebuhr 1942), 53.

It is also not possible to deny that there is a moral order; otherwise, our experiences would be utterly meaningless. Rather, we live in a moral order of grace. As shown by the events of the Second World War, this order of grace is one in which all efforts at moral assessment is sinful:

The cross is not the demonstration of the fact that man has a wrong standard of judgment which he must correct or for which he must substitute a right standard of judgment by means of which to assess goodness and sinfulness, but it shows that *the whole effort to assess and judge the goodness and the evil of self and others, and to reward or punish accordingly, is mistaken.*³⁰⁹

Niebuhr's primary concern is therefore not the action a person takes, but on their attitude, as David Grant put it:

Niebuhr's articles concerning World War II reflect the same tendency to focus ethical reflection back upon the attitude of the agent rather than upon the agent's outward actions.³¹⁰

In going to war, we must stop all attempts at moral judgment – both judging the self and the enemy. We must also cease thinking and acting in a self-centred fashion – all self-defensiveness and attempts at self-aggrandisement must be rejected. In addition, all of our actions must be done in the hope and trust in God's activity in the world – God has not given up on the world, we therefore must also not give up on it.

Niebuhr and the Holocaust: Humanitarian Intervention

Niebuhr does not mention the Holocaust in his writings, although the events of the Holocaust confirmed his belief that one of the main elements of war is that it is the innocent who suffer the most. War is like crucifixion in that the suffering of the relatively innocent is a call for the relatively guilty to repent of their sinfulness. Niebuhr's critique of both the just-war theory and pacifism is based on the fact that they are unable to interpret this central element of war. Richard Miller raised this

³⁰⁹ (Niebuhr 1943), 69.

³¹⁰ (Grant 1984), 1984. 26.

point:

The problem with conventional approaches to war ... is that they assume that the meaning of events is clear, that there can be some easy consensus about the problem of war and its moral dimensions.

Niebuhr uses the symbol of the cross to show that such epistemological self-confidence is deceptive, that our conventional wisdom fails to discern the whole because it obscures *the perduring fact of war, namely, that the burden of war falls on the innocent*. Pacifists and nonpacifists fail to detect this pattern in war because they are caught within the conventional categories of justice and injustice, purity and wickedness.³¹¹

When one understands this suffering as a central, if not the central, element in our experience of war, all wars become a type call to repent of sinfulness, of the henotheism of elevating the importance of one's own race or religion or nation over against others.

Niebuhr argues that Christians have a duty to protect their neighbours:

Instead of asking whether we are the right people or wrong people we shall simply inquire what duty we have to perform in view of what we have done amiss and in view of what God is doing. If that duty involves, as I believe it does, resistance to those who are abusing our neighbors, we shall not enquire whether our neighbors are not better people than those who are abusing them. In social life our duty frequently requires us to protect neighbors whom we dislike against the injustices of those whom we like and who on the whole seem to us to be better people than their victims are. The same principle applies in the affairs of the society of nations.

If injustice is done to totalitarian countries (as Greece was somewhat totalitarian) or communist countries or the Jewish people, the answer to our question about our duty does not depend on the answer to our question about the relative goodness of the victims and the victimizers. Nor does the answer depend on the reply to our question about our own relative goodness. Duty is duty and no man [*sic*] or nation has a right to excuse the self from doing the dutiful thing now because of past failures. Response to the judgment of God on men who have failed to do their duty in the past consists in the performance of present duty and not in the passing of new judgments on others because they have failed more signally in our view.³¹²

As here discussed, Niebuhr would later modify his view of duty somewhat.

Nonetheless, he does here argue that humanitarian intervention is morally

³¹¹ (Miller 1988), 248

³¹² (Niebuhr 1942), 53.

permissible if not necessarily a moral obligation. This intervention is not to be done with any kind of self-righteousness or triumphalism; it is rather to be done in repentance for our own shortcomings. This duty is not to be understood as a type of law which we must obey, but rather as a response to God's judgment of our own sinfulness. It is important to remember that, for Niebuhr, the first ethical question is what is happening and what is God doing. Therefore, like Barth, he does not argue for a principle or criteria for determining when we ought to go to war. War is understood as crucifixion because it is the relatively innocent who suffer for the sins of the relatively guilty. War is also understood as the judgment of God against all humans for their moral failings; this judgment is a call to repentance in our current decisions and, in the case of World War Two, included the decision to go to war. Prior to World War Two, Niebuhr also understood the suffering caused by the Japanese in their takeover of Manchuria as a call for the United States to repent of acting in self-interest. He did not, however, argue that the American repentance should lead to military intervention. Thus there is no law requiring military intervention in humanitarian crisis; each situation must be examined and then we must respond to what we understand God to be doing in the circumstances in an appropriate way. This response will always be characterised by prayerful humility and concern for all of God's creation.

Chapter 4: Critiques

Karl Barth

Introduction

Barth is arguably the twentieth century's most influential theologian. His theology has been written about and discussed by different people throughout the world. Comparatively little, however, has been said about his ethics. Although there are significant problems with Barth's ethical thought, there is also much value in his position. We will first discuss his theology and how it relates to his ethics, then we will examine his ethical thought with regard to the Second World War.

Theology

One of the cornerstones of Barth's theology is his recognition of the infinite qualitative difference between God and human beings, as he wrote in the introduction to the second edition of his commentary on Romans:

... if I have a system, it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called 'the infinite qualitative distinction' between time and eternity, and to my regarding this as possessing negative as well as positive significance: 'God is in heaven and thou art on earth.' The relation between such a God and such a man, and the relation between such a man and such a God, is for me the theme of the Bible and the essence of philosophy. Philosophers name this KRISIS of human perception – the Prime Cause ...³¹³

This recognition provided the basis for all of Barth's later theology and it has been argued to be his greatest theological legacy. Benjamin Leslie argues in his article on Barth in *A New Handbook of Christian Theologians* that Barth has four theological

³¹³ (Barth 1933), 10.

motifs or methodological patterns all of which are based on the first motif of the radical transcendence of God.³¹⁴ Bruce McCormack writes in a similar vein when he states: “Barth’s theological development from this point [circa 1915-1916] on represented a more-or-less continuous unfolding of a single theme: God is God.”³¹⁵ Related to Barth’s understanding of God’s radical transcendence is what H. Richard Niebuhr recognized to be one of Barth’s greatest contributions to theology – the rejection of nineteenth century anthropocentrism for a theocentric system. In an article discussing the Social Gospel and Karl Barth, Niebuhr wrote:

The distinctive difference between Barth and the Social Gospel is not that eschatology takes precedence over Kingdom of God in his thought but that *divine action, which eschatology symbolizes, takes precedence over human action...* Christian action is to be understood not as parallel to divine action in the common striving after a common telos, nor as counter-action to God’s action, but as response to the divine activity which precedes, accompanies, and awaits human action in history.³¹⁶

This must be maintained in order to avoid the mistakes of the Social Gospel and much of liberal theology in the nineteenth century – God’s activity must always be prior to and take precedence over human action.

A further component to God’s radical transcendence is God’s absolute freedom. God is free to be God’s self, we are totally dependent on God for our being. In 1928, Barth very succinctly stated:

It seems to be a truism to say that only God is absolutely powerful. This truism, however, is the dividing point of good and evil in the question of the will for power.³¹⁷

All of Barth’s later theology and ethics were based on these theocentric a priori. The reasons for this move are compelling, as discussed above.

Barth’s answer to the dilemma posed by God’s radical transcendence and our apparent ability to talk about God is one of his most important contributions to

³¹⁴ (Leslie 1996).

³¹⁵ (McCormack 1995), 134.

³¹⁶ (Niebuhr 193?), 120, emphasis mine.

³¹⁷ (Barth 1981), 258.

theological and ethical debate. His rediscovery of the classic Reformed doctrine of anhypostatic-enhypostatic Christology has received the attention it deserves in recent studies of God's providence. By means of this understanding of the veiling and unveiling of God in the divine revelation that is Jesus Christ, Barth focused on the importance of revelation *here and now*.³¹⁸ Barth clearly related all revelation to God's revelation in Jesus Christ, yet was unwilling at this point to argue that God does not reveal Godself in current affairs. As discussed above, one always finds glimpses in Barth of the desire to seek God's action in current events. The fact that, only by God's grace, that women and men could preach about God means that God is able to use the mere human words to reveal Godself. As Bruce McCormack wrote:

God's act of taking up a creaturely reality and revealing Himself in and through it was no longer restricted to the event of the cross, and not even to the incarnation. God was now seen by Barth as taking up human language and bearing witness to Himself in and through it. The result of such a divine action is that human words are qualified to be bearers of revelation. The complete inadequacy of human language for revelation is not set aside in the least. But in that the Word of God conceals Himself in human words, a relation of correspondence is established, an analogy between the Word and the words.³¹⁹

It is important to remember that Barth is not allowing natural theology any place here, as Brunner and others may have felt he did. Barth made his position abundantly clear in his well-known polemical work *No! An Answer to Emil Brunner*.³²⁰ Barth forcefully rejected any attempt to give humans the ability – be it an essential characteristic of human nature or a function of a universal grace of God – to read God off the face of any object. The “divine incognito” must be maintained; God is only visible where by God's grace a veiling and unveiling occur without affecting the

³¹⁸ McCormack makes a similar point in his discussion of Barth's theology during the Göttingen time. McCormack wrote: “... although the theoretical ground of Barth's theology in this phase was found in his Christology, his basic orientation (his existential focus, if you will) was toward the revelation-event which occurs *in the here and now* on the basis of God's Self-revelation in Christ... Thus, though the ground of his theology was now clearly Christological, his theology was largely pneumatocentric.” (328). See (McCormack 1995), 327-374)

³¹⁹ (McCormack 1995), 341.

³²⁰ (Brunner and Barth 1946)

status of the object itself. It is only God's grace that makes revelation possible. But God does make this possible:

Human activity which the creator uses to carry out the work of God's grace? This concept is intelligible on the basis of the Augustinian idea of the indirect identity of human and divine activity or of the Thomist idea of the co-operation of the divine *causa materialis* with a human *causa instrumentalis*. It might be favorably understood if Brunner were speaking of the one justifying and sanctifying grace of Jesus Christ. For in that case also human activity "comes within the purview of divine grace."³²¹

Thus by God's grace we can be enabled to see God's activity in the world. We are not given this ability by a once for all act of God's grace that gives us the glasses to see God's activity, but in every moment solely because God chooses and as a result of God's grace, we do see God's action. Therefore, there can be a place for looking at history to try to understand the causes of such and such an event; or natural science, to try and see what causes certain reaction. These are important for human understanding. One can also look at the historical events around Jesus of Nazareth. But none of these give access to revelation, although the event studied may be revelatory by the grace of God. That is not a condition of the mundane event or reaction; it is solely the grace of God.

The objects of revelation, of the veiling and unveiling of God's self-knowledge, are purely mundane things – human beings, human words or other human actions. It is in this way that Barth's article, "Verheißung und Verantwortung der christlichen Gemeinde im heutigen Zeitgeschehen," which was mentioned above and is more fully discussed below, is to be understood. God's will and governance can be seen in the current situation as a result of God's grace. This does not involve the divinization of those involved in a given situation, nor does it allow for a natural theology where we have the ability to, merely by properly understanding the situation, see the hand of God in it. It is by God's grace that God reveals God's activity in the world to us. God's activity in the world to us is, according to Barth, to command us; our question is therefore to obey or not to obey. We then are involved

³²¹ (Brunner and Barth 1946), 85.

in a “thinking after of the thoughts of God.” We must now look at how Barth’s ethics maintain this a priori of God has the primary actor, as the eternal Subject.

Ethics

Barth rejected any attempt to separate theology and ethics. As quoted above, the problem is the same for both dogmatics and ethics: *Soli Deo gloria!* Ethics cannot be separated from dogmatics, nor can dogmatics be separated from ethics. Barth wrote:

Our contention is, however, that the dogmatics of the Christian Church, and basically the Christian doctrine of God, is ethics. The doctrine is, therefore, the answer to the ethical question, the supremely critical question concerning the good in and over every so-called good in human actions and modes of action.³²²

We must therefore, in any discussion of the ethical problem of war also discuss the related theology. As Christian theology must remain theocentric, so too must Christian ethics.

For Christian ethics to be theocentric, it must reject all human attempts at determining good and evil. Adam’s sin forms the basis for anthropocentric ethics, where ethics is understood as the attempt by human beings to determine good and evil for themselves, thereby attempting to usurp God’s authority. This theological statement of the proper relation of humanity to God, based on the account in Genesis, seems to be compelling. Any attempt by humans to determine good and evil by themselves, where God remains at best secondary to human decision-making, must be rejected. God must remain the subject whose activity is prior to human action and determinative of good and evil.

Barth maintains that the proper task of Christian ethics is to ask questions. He wrote:

³²² (Barth 1957), 515.

... [I]f ethics is to keep to the point, then even in the face of the most striking impossibilities it must keep on putting *questions*, or rather showing that they are already put. It should not hand out either good or bad testimonies. It should not judge. Knowing the radical antithesis of good and bad, it should point to the command of God which alone can really and properly judge, and which will tell each of us what is good and bad.³²³

God commands, as discussed above a concrete individual in a concrete situation. The strength of this position is that it, as discussed above, allows God to remain subject and it leaves the determination of good and evil to God. By asking questions, it also forces us to try to understand our concrete situation. Barth's article, "Verheißung und Verantwortung der christlichen Gemeinde im heutigen Zeitgeschehen" shows the strength of this. As discussed above, in this article he provides a discussion of what events led up to the war and the events occurring at that time. After this discussion, he deals with how the Christian Church ought to participate in these events.³²⁴ This shows the strength of Barth's ethics. However, it also demonstrates its weakness. Ethics can not judge what a person ought to do, for were it to do so it would come between God and the person. Ethical decision-making therefore requires some sort of divine intuition of what God is commanding in a concrete situation. That, however, must not necessarily involve humans giving up all rational discourse concerning ethical decision-making, as Barth's divine-command morality seems to require. This provides very little help for individual decision making in Barth. Beyond the negative function of the biblical witness, he does provide tantalizing hints about how Christian ethics and theology may provide some positive guidance to help hear the command of God. In the first edition of his commentary to the Romans, he wrote:

There is in this last point-of-view, which we must take as Christians, no ethics. There is only the movement of God, which in every moment must correspond to, on our side, a quite specific understanding of the situation and then the necessary action that must follow from it.³²⁵

³²³ (Barth 1981), 129.

³²⁴ See (Barth 1944) and the discussion above.

³²⁵ (Barth 1963), 524

Although this theme was much subdued in the second edition and was not much developed in the 'twenties and 'thirties, in the first volume of the *Church Dogmatics* Barth wrote:

God may speak to us through Russian communism, through a flute concerto, through a blossoming shrub or through a dead dog. We shall do well to listen to God if really God does so.³²⁶

Later we find a tantalizing idea of how one may hear the command of God. For clarity, the quote is repeated here:

The will and governance of God are not obvious in current events in themselves, but hidden. We can now see them "in a mirror dimly" (I. Corinthians 13:12). It is this very Scripture that reminds us that God's will and governance are not simply invisible. It says, "we see." And indeed: we do see current events, the tremendous work and suffering of people in their decisions, undertakings and actions. And so, we also see with open eyes the will and governance of God which is carried out in them. But we see so much in addition that we can not see this if our eyes, before which so much of God's will and governance is shown, are not especially opened to see them. So it is with God's will and governance in current events. One could compare them to large handwriting with individual, powerful letters. We see these letters. They are clearly before us, written in the material of human deeds and experiences, which the radio and newspaper daily and even hourly lay out before us. But we need to know that all of those are not merely some wonderful forms, but indeed are letters. And we must know the alphabet and the language to which these letters belong. We need to read these letters and we need to be able to put them together into the written word. Then we would be able to recognise the will and governance of God, although they are hidden. That is the most important question: can we read?³²⁷

Thus, although rejecting any possibility of a natural theology based on God's immanence, Barth does believe that God's action in history is visible to humanity. This line of thought is not clearly developed in any of Barth's writings on dogmatics or ethics. He argues that God's action in the world is visible to us, although "in a mirror dimly." There is no indication here as to how "recognising the will and governance of God" can provide assistance for moral decision-making or, in other words, for hearing the command of God. Yet, if by learning to "read" we can see

³²⁶ (Barth 1936), 60.

³²⁷ (Barth 1944), 311.

what God's will in a concrete situation may be, it would follow that this can provide guidance for our own activity.

The question remains as to why Barth did not develop his ethics in this way. As many others have written, Barth's fear of casuistry led him to avoid any concrete advice on what one ought to do, or on a methodology for determining the proper course of action. Barth wrote:

... [T]here is only one real command, namely, that which is given to each of us in our own here and now. **Ethics does not have to set up the command of God, this one real command.** It has to see it as already set up in the life of a *person*. We do not have show what is command us. In this regard no ethics can intervene between God and human beings. We have to show rather what the fact that we are commanded means, or, conversely, what it means for the fact that we are commanded that the command is given within our human life.³²⁸

Concerning Barth's understanding of casuistry, Nigel Biggar has written:

This understanding of casuistry as the epitome of ethical rationalism, as a necessarily closed logical system, is something that Barth shares with most Protestant writers on ethics since the seventeenth century – including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Emil Brunner and Helmut Thielicke. It is, however, a misconception; for casuistry has not always, or perhaps even usually, pretended to provide an absolute method of deciding what is right.³²⁹

It is this misunderstanding of casuistry that led Barth to reject any concrete assistance for ethical decision-making. Any attempt to speak about concrete ethical decisions is rejected as human usurpation of God's authority. For this reason, Barth argues that ethics can only discuss what it means that God has commanded us, not what God has commanded or how we are to hear what God does command us. Barth's ethics are thus individualistic in that only the concrete individual in a concrete situation can hear the command of God for her or him in that situation.

³²⁸ (Barth 1981), 118. Bold-emphasis mine.

³²⁹ (Biggar 1993), 40-41.

Divine-Command Morality

Barth's divine command ethics is therefore, at best, problematic. Although his arguments against separating dogmatics and ethics and against any anthropocentric ethic as discussed above are compelling, the kind of ethics that this argument led him to must be questioned. Theologically Barth is attempting to define ethics in terms of the doctrine of God. Practically, however, Barth's ethics do not all offer much assistance in dealing with the general question of what we ought to do nor with the specific question of under what conditions a nation ought to go to war.

According to Barth, the Bible does not provide positive commands about what we must do in our current situation. It rather, as best exemplified by the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, defines the area in which we are to act. It does this in a negative way by showing what is not, under any circumstances, morally justifiable. The Bible thus provides a *via negativa* in for ethical decision-making, defining not what we must do but what we must not do. In the New Testament, most notably in the Sermon on the Mount, this argument is continued. Concerning the Ten Commandments, Barth wrote:

What in reality ought to occur, that is a question in itself. But whatever ought to occur it must occur within these boundaries. ...³³⁰

There are two main problems with divine-command morality. Firstly, it makes no allowance for moral argument. Although one can discuss what is not allowed, within the realm of what is allowed there can be no debate. That which a concrete individual ought to do in a concrete situation is left to the individual's intuition. Negatively, what God will not command to do, the boundaries within which God commands us, are indeed given in Scripture. Positively, however, we are to hear God's command in the situation. Barth gives very little guidance to how one hears this divine command. The reasons for this are discussed above.

The second problem is closely related to the first: divine-command morality is intensely individualistic. There is very little room for any kind of moral debate

³³⁰ (Barth 1957), 684.

within a group. As Barth stated that God speaks God's command to a concrete person in a concrete situation, discussion may occur concerning whether a certain decision falls within the boundaries for human activity set out by God in the Bible, but within those boundaries there is no way to determine which option is the morally correct one.

The assumption that underlies Barth's divine-command morality is that God's activity in the world requires persons to respond by obeying. God's activity, understood as command, is gracious activity:

The one Word of God is both Gospel *and* Law. It is not law by itself and independent of the Gospel. But it is also not Gospel without Law. In its content, it is Gospel; in its form and fashion, it is Law. It is first Gospel and then Law. It is the Gospel which contains and encloses the Law as the ark of the covenant the tables of Sinai. But it is both Gospel *and* Law.³³¹

While it is true that God's command to us is God's gracious activity, it does not include all forms of God's grace to us. There are other ways in which God demonstrates his graciousness to the world, ways which may be seen in the radio and newspaper. These demonstrations call for a response from us and, in such a way, may loosely be termed "commands" or "law." However, this is clearly not what Barth has in mind when he writes

A command – that is, the command in the strictest sense, the command of God – is a claim addressed to man in such a way that it is given integrally, so that he cannot control its content or decide its concrete implication. A command is a demand and not merely a theoretical exposition of the form which it may take. It comes to us, therefore, with a specific content, embracing the whole outer and inner substance of each momentary decision and epitomising the totality of each momentary requirement. It does not need any interpretation, for even to the smallest details it is self-interpreting. Only when the command has this character is it obviously a question addressed to us and demanding the response of our actions – the action of every moment with its concrete characteristics... Only then do we stand in a relation of responsibility, of obedience or disobedience, to Another, to a transcendent Commander and Judge.³³²

³³¹ (Barth 1957), 511.

³³² (Barth 1957), 665.

Yet, it seems that God's activity in the world requires the response of obedience. This seems to limit the nature of God's activity to one of command. Barth argues that God's activity in the world for ethics is one of commanding. This has two further problems. Firstly, it seems to limit God's potential for activity in the world. The Trinitarian model Barth uses does allow for some differentiation concerning God's command in the world – when it is understood as the command of God the Creator, God the Reconciler or God the Redeemer. Yet, this difference is logical and not ontological; there is only one command of God. There are indeed times when God's activity must be understood as command, to which we respond either with obedience or with disobedience. There are also, however, other times where God's action is not a command and may therefore require a different kind of ethical response. For example, God's work to sustain God's world should lead us to respond by also working to sustain the world. This, however, is not a general principle for Christian ethics that would be understood casuistically; rather it is a response to God's gracious activity in the world. God remains the subject; our activity is a response to God's prior activity. This is the second problem with this Barth's ethics: it fails to acknowledge our nature as humans. As created beings, we are dependent on God's graciousness for all that we have. However, God has created us with significant abilities to understand our world and to shape it. It is in war that we can clearly see the human potential for destruction and creation. We have created the atomic bomb with its tremendous destructive force. We have also made huge advances in medicine, in technology, in farming and in many other areas. In this point, Barth fails to remain realistic about human nature; humans are limited and dependent on God for their very being but, within that dependency, we can act in significant ways.

War

Barth is brutally realistic in his description of war. He convincingly argued that war may not be an inevitable result of sin. It must be seen as *opus alienum* to the nature of the State. However it is at least always a potentiality. Barth admonished the State not to have “standing armies:

It is only... as the Church has a good conscience that it is doing its best for a just peace among states and nations, that it can and should plead for the preservation of peace among states and nations... The Church can and should raise its voice against the institution of standing armies in which the officers constitute *per se* a permanent danger to peace... It exists in this aeon. Hence it is not commissioned to proclaim that war is absolutely avoidable. But it is certainly commissioned to oppose the Satanic doctrine that war is inevitable and therefore justified, that it is unavoidable and therefore right when it occurs, so that Christians have to participate in it...³³³

This must be rejected as unrealistic. It has been argued that it is in this point that Barth must be strengthened and Christians must work to oppose and preparation for war in peacetime. David Clough has written that when we notice that

...Barth considers that in peacetime we must devote all our energy to peacemaking, and that preparation for war demands substantial human and economic resources, we have a persuasive case that Christians cannot support preparations for the exceptional case in which they may be called upon to go to war: they are too busy with the emergency of peace to prepare for the distant and unlikely prospect of war, and know that war preparations are incompatible with serious attempts to build a peaceful order. This means there is no mandate to prepare for war. There remains the almost unthinkable possibility that God will call Christians to engage in large-scale killing of their fellows, but this Grenzfall case no longer transforms the rest of the existence of the Christian. It is true that a nation governed on this basis will be less likely to succeed in war if it is ever called upon to fight, but the Christian vocation is to peacemaking, not to amassing state-of-the-art tools for killing and destruction, and consigning a significant section of society to

³³³ (Barth 1961), 460.

manufacturing these armaments or to full-time training in using them without qualms.³³⁴

The rejection of a standing army and Clough's extension of Barth's argument must be rejected as unrealistic. This must be rejected for two main reasons: firstly, in the current situation war remains a possibility. It may be at some future time that war is no longer a possibility, but until that point standing armies remain a necessity as, and this is the second reason, the nature of modern warfare and the skill required to effectively fight a war means that the members of the military be sufficiently trained to use the technology of war. Although war is *opus alienum* to the state and signifies the failure of all States to be true to their *opus proprium*, it remains the case that we live in a fallen world of imperfect States. Were war to be eliminated in some distant time, there would be other areas affected by human sinfulness, as we live in the already but not yet of the Kingdom of God, which can only be brought about by God's action and not our own. Realism requires recognizing the pervasiveness of human sin and the nature of modern warfare. We will have cause to return to this point in the final chapter.

A further problem with Barth is his failure to discuss what, in the just-war tradition, has been called *ius in bello*, how one is to act in carrying out military action. Barth argues that the decision to act must be carried out resolutely and joyfully if God is commanding you to act. He also argues:

Much is already gained if we only do at last soberly admit that, whatever may be the purpose or possible justice of a war, it now means that, without disguise or shame, not only individuals or even armies, but *whole nations as such, are out to kill one another by every possible means.*³³⁵

This is a realistic description of war, however, as Barth provides nothing about how one is to carry out a war, it leaves him open to the charge that when we believe God has given the command to go to war, that war is to be carried out as a total war.

³³⁴ From an unpublished paper by David Clough, Fighting at the Command of God: Reassessing the Borderline Case in Karl Barth's Account of War in the *Church Dogmatics*, presented to the post-graduate seminar at New College, the University of Edinburgh, in November 1999.

³³⁵ (Barth 1961), 453.

H. Richard Niebuhr

Introduction

H. Richard Niebuhr argued in an undated essay (but apparently from some time in the mid to late 1930's) that

The distinctive difference between Barth and the Social Gospel is not that eschatology takes precedence over Kingdom of God in his thought but that divine action, which eschatology symbolizes, takes precedence over human action...

The real question which Barthianism raises for us then is not about Kingdom of God and eschatology but about the relation of human action to divine action in human history. According to a popular interpretation of Barthianism, emphasis on divine action not only excludes the human initiative in determining the goal of existence for both God and man [*sic*], but also all significance of human action. Barth's statements on politics are then regarded as unconnected with his theology. But Barth's own statements, particularly in the second volume of his *Dogmatik*, indicate that this interpretation rests on a misinterpretation or on the use of a different understanding of the nature of human action than he employs. *Christian action is to be understood not as parallel to divine action in the common striving after a common telos, nor as counter-action to God's action, but as response to the divine activity which precedes, accompanies, and awaits human action in history.*³³⁶

As discussed above, Barth developed this "divine activity which precedes, accompanies, and awaits human action" into the threefold command of God the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, where the prior divine action to which persons ethically respond is understood as command. He wrote:

The task of theological ethics is to understand the Word of God as the command of God. Its fundamental, simplest and comprehensive answer to the ethical problem is that human action is good in so far as it is sanctified by the Word of God which as such is also the command of God.³³⁷

³³⁶ (Niebuhr), 120-121 emphasis mine.

³³⁷ (Barth 1961), 4.

Thus, concrete individuals are understood to be responding to the concrete command of God in their concrete situation. The individual can either respond obediently or disobediently. Niebuhr's understanding of God's primary activity is much broader than Barth's and includes God's activity of command but is not limited to it. Ethics must be theocentric, but there are other activities of God in the world besides command which call for a different response. Thus, although starting from a similar position regarding the priority of divine activity, Barth and Niebuhr's ethics are radically different. For Niebuhr, the activity of God that is relevant for ethics is not limited to divine command and the human response to God's prior activity allows for more human input, as Niebuhr wrote concerning war:

War does not come upon men solely by their will, for they do not desire it, but its judgments are not visited upon them or its sacrifice demanded of them by arbitrary power. Human intention and action lead to war and all human conflict is carried on with human will and consent. As there is something in war that God does to man so there is something that men do to God in their action upon each other. It is this aspect of human action that the church seeks to interpret.³³⁸

It is therefore important to understand firstly God's action in history and then our proper response to it. This shows some of the strengths of Niebuhr's position and also some of the weakness.

God and History

As shown above, Niebuhr differentiates between internal and external history in his discussion of God's activity in history. External history is objective and impersonal, dealing with the relationship between events and concepts; internal history is personal and participatory, it deals with values and norms. This is one of the major weaknesses in Niebuhr's position³³⁹ – the existence of and our ability to know of a purely impersonal, objective history has been much questioned in much recent thought. Even Niebuhr's example of the American Declaration of

³³⁸ (Niebuhr 1943), 167-168.

³³⁹ For a discussion and critique of Niebuhr's understanding of history, see (Harvey 1966), 230-242.

Independence, quoted above, is flawed. Both Lincoln's understanding of the declaration and that of the *Cambridge Modern History* provide interpretations of the document, albeit interpretations done from a different perspective and addressed to different audiences. Niebuhr rightly points out that the difference is not one of accuracy – the “the terms the external historian employs are not more truly descriptive of the things-in-themselves than those the statesman uses and that the former's understanding of what really happened is not more accurate than the latter's.”³⁴⁰ In fact, all human understanding is limited by time and place, making knowledge of things-in-themselves impossible, as Niebuhr rightly argued:

No other influence has affected twentieth century thought more deeply than the discovery of spatial and temporal relativity. The understanding that the spatio-temporal point of view of an observer enters into his knowledge of reality, so that no universal knowledge of things in themselves is possible, so that all knowledge is conditioned by the standpoint of the knower, plays the same rôle in our thinking that the idealistic discoveries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the evolutionary discovery of the nineteenth played in the thought of earlier generations.³⁴¹

The “things-in-themselves” or “ultimate reality” of the event refers to the objective event in itself, and is a third category for any occurrence in history. Niebuhr argues that we have no access to this, yet maintains the distinction between internal and external history. Even when internal and external history is understood at the most basic level of personal, participatory history that forms me as an individual and impersonal, non-participatory history of objects and relations observed objectively, this distinction has problems. The relationship of external to internal history is never clarified, nor is the relation between alien internal histories, which, according to Niebuhr, belong to the category of external history and one's own internal history. Some aspects of alien internal histories may well provide constructive criticisms for one's perspective. Yet many aspects of this understanding of one's own group will be incompatible with one's internal history; it may well be that another group's understanding of Christianity is simply wrong, that it therefore cannot be subsumed into Christian internal history. There is also the problem of defining the group to

³⁴⁰ (Niebuhr 1941), 45.

³⁴¹ (Niebuhr 1941), 5.

whom an internal history belongs – when discussing Christian internal history, does one include Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant groups? Although there are significant overlaps between these groups, there are also no less significant areas that are exclusive to each group. This becomes even more complicated when one further divides the Protestant groups into denominations. Van Harvey summed up this problem well when he wrote:

The difficulty with the overly restrictive division between internal and external history is that it obscures the complexity of standpoints. For any given perspective... contains a number of logical types of assertions. Perspectives are field encompassing... because perspectives are so inclusive and field-encompassing, they frequently overlap. One might say that internal histories contain many external elements just as external histories are not lacking some of the characteristics of inner history.³⁴²

In fact, Niebuhr subsumes within external history the internal histories of other persons and groups, making the distinction still more confused. On the one hand, he seems to define external history as objective, non-participatory history contrasted by internal history, which is subjective and participatory. On the other hand, he tends to use external history to refer to any history that is not an individual or group's internal history. This is further confused by the fact that, according to Niebuhr, it is a Christian obligation to bring external views of the church into the church's internal history as a critique of the church. Indeed, as God is active in all history, this provides a divine criticism of the church. Yet, certain values and interpretations that other groups use to interpret Christianity may be incompatible with the Christian internal history, making it impossible to incorporate parts of alien internal histories into Christianity.

One can maintain much that is good in Niebuhr's presentation if one replaces the hard distinction between internal and external history with a more perspectival approach. Rather than using Niebuhr's categories, we need to speak of a spectrum of perspectives for understanding history. If we strive to view history more objectively, as the author of *Cambridge Modern History* did, we must bracket off, as it were our subjective concerns and interests. This cannot be done entirely, as we can never

³⁴² (Harvey 1966), 241.

escape from ourselves to view a thing or event *an sich*. Yet we may strive for this perspective to a greater or lesser extent, depending on our audience and our intention. In other circumstances, we may speak from a different perspective. A good example of this ability to change perspectives is that of a pastor, who may use Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan in a sermon, in counselling and in a lecture to seminary students. In each of these circumstances, the pastor is interpreting the same parable, but in significantly different ways. Thus, in the sermon she may refer to the importance of community and helping out those who are in need of assistance, regardless of our prejudice. In counselling she may refer to her experience of needing to let others help her and how this lesson is important for relationships. To the students, she may choose to discuss the fact that it is only found in the Gospel of Luke and the relevance of Jewish law and custom for interpreting this story. In all three cases, it is the same person interpreting the same story, although in radically different ways. In the case of the sermon, she is interpreting the parable socially, possibly interpreting her personal experiences by means of the parable in order to indicate something about the nature of the Christian life with others before God; in the second case she is interpreting the parable much more personally as a way of changing an individual's attitude and behaviour; to the seminary students she would attempt to bracket out the personal in order to discuss the objective characteristics of the parable. In the same way, Lincoln may well have spoken about the Declaration of Independence in a radically different way than he did in the Gettysburg address. Understanding our interpretations of history as being perspectival and on a spectrum rather than categorizing them as internal and external thus provides a more helpful way of dealing with the ability of a person or group to look at themselves from a different perspective. We will have cause to return to this again in the final chapter.

Niebuhr's use of the terms "external history" and "objective" is also problematic especially when discussing the location of God's activity in history. Is God's activity found in external or internal history? When, however, we cease differentiating internal and external history as personal and impersonal, subjective and objective, and move to a more perspectival interpretation we are helped in this matter. Then God's action is understood to occur in what Niebuhr termed ultimate reality, yet the interpretation of that history remains a personal and subjective task.

This model is close to what Barth posits in his essay, quoted and discussed above.³⁴³ However, Barth differs from Niebuhr in what this “reading” means. Although Barth never developed this idea, for Niebuhr’s ethics it is central. Once we modify the distinction between internal, subjective history and external, objective history, we can locate God’s activity in activity in the “ultimate reality.” Niebuhr wrote:

I am trying to think about war and peace from the only point of view that is available to me, which is that of a man whose thoughts are very far from being divine; but it is that of one who has been persuaded that if he is to make any sense out of his experience and life he must always try to discover the universal in every particular and respond to it. Further, it is the point of view of one who has been required to seek in every particular that universal being and action which Jesus called Father. Hence my problem is not that of looking with God on the world but of finding God in the world, or rather that of understanding how to stand in the presence of God as I stand in the presence of every individual event, good or evil.³⁴⁴

For Niebuhr, as discussed above, individuals make sense out of experience (both their own and those of others in their own time and in history) by using symbols to interpret them. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ provide the central symbols for interpretation to the Christian church. This provides for one of the main differences between Barth and Niebuhr. Niebuhr argued that this allows room for apologetics, as we attempt to make sense of our experiences and situation on the basis of our centre of value. The apologetic question is how well we succeed in understanding our experience. For Barth, as discussed above, all apologetics is rejected. We will return to this use of apologetics in the final chapter.

Human Ability

One of the main strengths of Niebuhr’s ethics, related to his use of apologetics, is the recognition of humanity’s significant yet limited abilities. This is also one of the main differences from Barth’s position; for Barth, ethics involves

³⁴³ See the discussion immediately preceding this section and the discussion on Barth. The reference that best shows Barth’s thought here is in footnote 268.

³⁴⁴ (Aldrich 1942), 59.

listening for God's command and then acting or not acting on it. The command determines what good human action is in any situation. Human action is determined solely by God's free decision and is either obedient and good or disobedient and evil. For Niebuhr, on the other hand, humans respond to God's activity in any situation. Good is determined by the relationship of our activity to God's prior acting. This allows good to be determined by God and not by us while allowing for creative action on our part in response to God's action. It maintains that we are created by God with the ability and obligation to interpret events and then respond accordingly. Our interpretation of events is based on our centre or centres of value. This is where we sin, by having inadequate centres of value. Niebuhr defined three different systems for this, the first two of which are sinful: polytheism: where we have different centres of value for different situations; henotheism: where we take a limited, created God and elevate it to the supreme good; and radical monotheism, where the centre of value is not one reality amongst many others but is the principle of being itself or, in Christian terms, God. Douglas F. Ottati describes Niebuhr's understanding of evil in social terms. Ottati wrote:

Niebuhr's early prophetic judgment... was that modern Western culture is caught up in idolatrous faiths that bring with them a train of bad consequences. The idolatries are variant forms of "anthropocentrism" that place human beings at the center of things, so that a human community, activity, or desire becomes a limiting, distorting, and even dangerous center of value (*The Church Against the World*, 1935, p. 136). Thus, nationalism teaches people that their own country is the most valuable reality, while capitalism insists that their own economic production is prime power and source of meaning. Racism takes a particular ethnic group as the center of meaning and value.³⁴⁵

Good is therefore understood as having an adequate centre of value. Similarly to Barth, this is because having a centre of value that is one part of reality is idolatrous, putting part of the created order onto God's throne and, thereby, making human beings the arbiters of good and evil. People, indeed, all that has being, is thus understood as having value because it is related to the same principle of being that

³⁴⁵ (Ottati 1996), 325.

we are. This forces us to expand our area of concern and to envisage all that has being as having value. Quoting Ottati on Niebuhr again:

Here [in Niebuhr's radical monotheism] the power by which all things are, becomes the center of value. The community of moral concern is no closed society, but extends to the entire community of being, and so there is no privileged or "in" group. Whatever participates in the community of being has value. To promote the well-being of this community is good; to injure or repress it is bad.³⁴⁶

Consequently Niebuhr's understanding of human action and the related understanding of evil provides for an accurate way of understanding human and group behaviour.

A person's actions can help determine her or his life, but we do not control our life. As discussed above, persons do not want to go to war yet war comes about as a result of their actions and the responses of others to those actions. Niebuhr's ethics is thus a reflection of the interdependent nature of our life. Our actions are responses to actions upon us and done in anticipation of responses to our responses. The question of the nature and relative importance of our action is not developed by Niebuhr. He has been charged with quietism³⁴⁷ for his insistence that God is objectively active in the world and that humans, corrupted by sin, can do nothing. He wrote as early as 1932:

Man's task is not that of building Utopias but that of eliminating the weeds and tilling the soil so that the kingdom of God can grow. His method is not one of striving for perfection or of acting perfectly, but of clearing the road by repentance and forgiveness.³⁴⁸

This "eliminating the weeds and tilling the soil" seems to lend credence to the charge of quietism. In doing so, he is rejecting nineteenth century optimistic liberalism, with its belief in human progress to bring about the kingdom of God. Niebuhr is trying to

³⁴⁶ (Ottati 1996), 328.

³⁴⁷ See, for example (Fox 1996). "Richard's despairing passivity, like his brother's restless activism, had intellectual as well as psychological roots... For Richard the war [World War II] revealed the inscrutability of God's purpose, the *futility of human striving to transform the world*. God himself acted in history; man's puny efforts to affect its course evoked divine compassion." 22, emphasis mine.

³⁴⁸ (Niebuhr 1932), 21.

avoid what he terms ditheism – believing that God’s action in history and, at the same time human action can bring about the desired end – utopia or, in Christian terminology, the kingdom of God. However, Niebuhr is not arguing that humans can do nothing, rather, he is arguing that humans can and must act responsibly, but that humans are limited creatures who can act but only within a limited field of activity. Moreover, in our acting we limit other persons and objects possibilities for activity. We must act fully in the knowledge that our acting is sinful and requires repentance, but act we must.

Niebuhr provides us with tools then to interpret war. As with Barth, Niebuhr argues that ethics cannot provide us with hard and fast rules that determine how we should act. Niebuhr agreed with Bonhoeffer’s view from his *Ethics* and quoted by Barth:

An ethic cannot be a book in which there is set out how everything in the world actually ought to be but unfortunately is not, and an ethicist cannot be a man who always knows better than others what is to be done and how it is to be done. An ethic cannot be a work of reference for moral action which is guaranteed to be unexceptional, and the ethicist cannot be the competent critic and judge of every human activity. An ethic cannot be a retort in which ethical or Christian human beings are produced, and the ethicist cannot be the embodiment or ideal type of a life which is, on principle, moral.³⁴⁹

This is an inevitable but unfortunate truth. Ethics can help us to interpret events and respond appropriately to them and help us to understand our own decisions. However, ethics cannot make the decisions for us. Niebuhr’s use of the symbol of Jesus’ crucifixion and of God’s judgement to interpret war aids us in our own decision making concerning the appropriate use of military force. They point to the fact that war is a call for all to repent of their self-centredness. God’s judgement falls upon the relatively innocent to call all to repent of their sins. For Niebuhr, as for Barth, this renders any kind of self-righteousness in war impossible. War comes about as a result of sinful human actions in peacetime. The call to repentance is therefore not a call to pacifistic inactivity; it is rather a call for more appropriate activity in peacetime, so that war may become less likely. In the final chapter, we

³⁴⁹ (Bonhoeffer 1955), 236.

will see how Barth and Niebuhr provide assistance in building a contemporary ethic of war.

Summary and Conclusion

Barth and Niebuhr complement each other's thought and help us in our understanding of the ethics of war. As the world has changed since World War Two ended in 1945, we cannot simply appropriate either Barth or Niebuhr's ethics without significant modification. Yet an understanding of their thought is important for our ethical thought concerning war. In the final chapter, I will discuss what I term a *hopefully realistic ethic*. In that discussion, we must take several points from both Barth and Niebuhr into consideration. These points can be categorized into three headings: the doctrine of God, the understanding of human existence and the understanding of the ethics of war.

God

God must remain subject in all theological and ethical thought. God's activity must therefore be understood as primary to all human activity. This is the beginning point for almost all of both Barth and Niebuhr's thought and means that only God can determine good and evil, as good must be understood relationally to God as subject and not as object. This theological point must be central for any theological ethic.

This leads us to the question of God's activity in human experience or, in other words, in history. Both Barth and Niebuhr clearly argued that God is active in history and that we can experience this activity. For Barth, God's activity that is relevant for ethics is limited to command. This command is understood in three different ways, as that of the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, but the nature of the act remains the same. This seems to contradict Barth's insistence that God is free to be Godself. Niebuhr, on the other hand, has argued for an ethics of response to God's prior activity. This allows for the first point, that God's activity is primary,

without limiting the nature of that activity in the world. God is active in the world commanding us, but also judging and redeeming us. These activities require responses that are not obedience in the narrow sense of the word, but are none the less compelling for human action.

The question of the location of God's activity was discussed above in the section on Niebuhr's understanding of God and history. It is important to note that God's action is not limited to the occasional miraculous occasion that changes the direction of history. Rather, God is active in all of the finite aspects of God's creation. This gives reason to hope and partially provides for the hopefulness of hopeful realism. The question remains whether we have eyes to see the divine activity in our experience. The next question is how we can fit our activity in with God's. In some cases, where God's activity is understood teleologically, or as aiming for some goal, we ought to attempt to work toward the same goal. In other cases, where God's activity is understood to be judgement, we ought then to repent of what God is judging in us. In determining what God is doing and what the best response to that activity, we must discuss this with others both within our society and without, so as to gain the best understanding possible. This, however, leads us to the next subsection on the nature of humanity.

Humanity

Realistically understood, humans have tremendous abilities to work in and change the world, but, at the same time, are limited to what they can do. Theology and ethics must take this fact into consideration, if they are to be realistic. One needs only look at the way the world has changed in the last century to see evidence of this fact. There have been tremendous achievements in many different areas, including communication, medicine, transport and information technologies. We have sent people to the moon; people with diseases that in the past were inevitably fatal, like diabetes, can now be treated and lead relatively normal lives; news reporting now occurs as it happens, rather than weeks or even months after the events. This demonstrates our ability to change our environment and experience while giving still further cause to hope. Yet, this century also demonstrates the limits of our abilities.

There have been two world wars and countless others; racism, xenophobia, religious intolerance, and bigotry are still prevalent in our experience; people starve, homelessness, drug use and addiction are still with us, the list goes on. We need to be aware of this aspect of human experience in order to formulate an ethic that is true to and meaningful for that experience.

Our experience demonstrates that, although we can influence much of our life, there are also significant areas we cannot control. We live in a web of relations with persons and things that play a decisive role in our lives. Indeed, the very fact of our existence lies in things over which we have no control. The actions of other persons limit our possibilities for action. Our responses to these actions, in turn, limit others. Natural events occur over which we have no control and yet can change the course of the history of individuals and of nations. We live in, to use Niebuhr's terminology, a triadic realm of human activity, in which we respond to prior actions upon us, while anticipating responses to our response. An ethics that assumes that we can control our existence, or denies our ability to nonetheless shape our experience, must be rejected.

Barth described the limitedness of humans when he describes those boundaries within which moral action must take place. For Barth, God commands us within these boundaries, never outside of them. Thus murder is never the command of God, nor is dishonouring your parents, nor coveting. Although the limitation of God's ethical activity in the world to command should be rejected, these boundaries remain, as there are limits to what we can do and to what we ought to do. The fitting action to what God is doing in any situation will never involve transgressing the boundaries for human activity. Thus, an offensive war in order to gain greater wealth or security for one's nation is never the fitting response. The crossing of these boundaries involves persons in sinful activities and has tragic results for themselves and for others.

Humans seek to make sense of their experience and, in so doing, use centres of value to provide a link for their various experiences. As we have such a varied experience, as Niebuhr clearly demonstrated, we also have varied centres of value – we all fall guilty to the sin of idolatry by taking one finite element of our experience and elevating it to the source of meaning for our lives. Niebuhr terms this henotheism

and contrasts it with polytheism. However, it seems truer to say that we are all polytheists, in that we elevate various finite things to sources of meaning in different situations – it peacetime, I may have as my centre of value my class, or my race, or even just my geographic region; should peacetime become wartime, I may well have my nation as the centre of value, or democracy or freedom. These values may well be good and noble things, the danger occurs when we elevate their status to a source of meaning – when a nation's relations with a country are solely determined by that nation's value to my nation. This type of idolatry leads to brokenness in relations amongst different nations and different people. For Niebuhr, this is one of the most basic types of sinfulness, and this century seems to provide considerable support for this position.

Ethics of War

Both Barth and Niebuhr agree on the necessity of a realistic understanding of war. Barth is clear that war is wrong except at the boundaries of what is morally allowed. There are certain illusions about war that can no longer be maintained, such as that war is a matter for only a few – professional soldiers and rulers, and the rest are not involved. Modern warfare has destroyed this idea, as a whole population suffers during war and is, directly or indirectly, responsible for the military action. The illusion that wars are fought for higher ideals, such as democracy or freedom, also must be discarded. Barth argues that wars are fought for prestige and economic reasons. That seems to be too narrow an understanding for the reasons a nation goes to war – economics clearly does play a large role in why a nation goes to war, but, as people's motives are always mixed, so too are the motives of nations. Wars occur because of a hugely complex array of factors, to limit them to economic or idealistic reasons fails to account for this.

The just-war theory is based on an illusion that also must be rejected – that we live in a moral universe where good is rewarded and evil punished. Although Barth and Niebuhr's rejections of the just-war tradition differ somewhat, they do agree in this point. The idea that a just nation (or group of nations) punishes an unjust nation must be based on this type of moral understanding of the universe. The

relationships between nations are so complicated, however, that it is impossible to point to one event or one nation and state that that was the cause of the war. No nation involved in a war can claim to be absolutely just, nor can any nation claim to be acting as the instrument of God's judgement on an evil, unjust nation. All nations are responsible for the situation that leads one nation to go to war against another. As Niebuhr so eloquently stated, God's judgement in warfare is against all nations. A nation may find itself in circumstances where it has to go to war, but that nation is also responsible for the situation. It may be relatively just, in comparison with its opponent, but that does not mean that it is absolutely just. One of the strengths of Niebuhr's argument that war is the judgement of God is this point: God calls all nations to repent of their sinfulness in this judgement. An ethic of war must reject any attempt by any nation to prove its absolute goodness, regardless of the relative justice of its fight.

Chapter 5: A Hopeful Realist Ethic of War

Based on Barth and Niebuhr's discussions of World War Two, we can build a theological social ethic of "hopeful realism."³⁵⁰ This model will help in contemporary ethical decision-making concerning war and can also be applied to other issues. Barth's understanding of theological ethics, including his rejection of anthropocentric ethics, as discussed above, is convincing. His use of anhypostatic – enhypostatic Christology to allow God to act through mundane things provides a key for ethical thinking. His divine-command ethics seems less compelling, as it does not seem to offer assistance in ethical decision-making or allow room for moral discussion and argument. This is especially true in situations where two (or more) persons or groups are convinced of their view and are willing to fight to defend it against the threat offered by opposing views, as is the case with war. Niebuhr's ethics, on the other hand, provides a way to understand the ethics of war that is consistent with Barth's theology, but avoids the pitfalls of a divine-command morality. Unfortunately, Niebuhr did not develop his ethics of war systematically. As the world situation has changed since World War Two, we cannot merely appropriate either Niebuhr or Barth without significant modification. However, we can develop an ethics of war that is indebted to Barth's theology and Niebuhr's ethics yet is also relevant to the current situation.

The term "hopeful realism" is clearly related to both Barth and Niebuhr's thought. In Barth, it can be seen as early as his use of the dialectic of God's *no* and *yes* to the world. In essence, God's *no* indicates the realism and God's *yes* the hope. If God says *yes*, this means that God is concerned for the world and active in the world, so we cannot be without hope, we cannot give up on what God refuses to give up on. The *no*, understood as realism, recognizes the pervasiveness of sin in the world. Barth does seem to limit his realism to this negative view of human abilities, as discussed above. Realism must take human sinfulness into account but, in order to

³⁵⁰ The term, hopeful realism comes from a recent book by Douglas Ottati: (Ottati 1999). Much of what is written in this chapter is informed by this book, and Ottati's previous two books, (Ottati 1995); and (Ottati 1989) Ottati, however, has not applied hopeful realism in the way that I seek to do here.

be truly realistic, it must also take human abilities into account. Barth's understanding of God's *yes* to the world can be understood in this case as *hope*. In a beautiful section from the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth described Mozart's vision of the creation and God's *yes* to it:

As though in the light of this end, he [Mozart] heard the harmony of creation to which the shadow also belongs but in which the shadow is not darkness, deficiency is not defeat, sadness cannot become despair, trouble cannot degenerate into tragedy and infinite melancholy is not ultimately forced to claim undisputed sway. Thus the cheerfulness in this harmony is not without its limits. But the light shines all the more brightly because it breaks forth from the shadow. The sweetness is also bitter and cannot therefore cloy. Life does not fear death but knows it well.³⁵¹

Because God acted decisively in the human Jesus, there is hope for the world. Barth in his later thought limited God's activity in history to the life of Jesus. God's grace allowed Jesus to unveil and veil God's activity. This led later commentators on Barth to accuse him of an undue Christocentrism. However, prior to the development of his account of election in the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth's theology was firmly based on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, yet was more Pneumocentric. Barth did not at that point limit God's revelation so clearly to Jesus Christ, but allowed for God to be active in revealing Godself throughout history. God's revelation is always consistent and must be judged by the revelation in Jesus Christ as witnessed to in Scripture. But God is active in the world, therefore Christians can never be without hope. This is the hopefulness that is always present in Barth's theology and which we must account for in any contemporary ethic.

Hopeful realism is also closely related to Niebuhr's ethics of response. For Niebuhr, God is active in all of the historical events. As God is understood in Trinitarian terms, as the One who creates, redeems, and sustains the world, we can never be anything but hopeful. Niebuhr stated:

The great anxiety of life, the great distrust, appears in the doubt that the Power whence all things come, the Power which has thrown the self and its companions into existence, is not good. The question is always before us, Is Power good? Is it good to and for what it has brought into being? Is it good

³⁵¹ (Barth 1960), 298.

with the goodness of integrity? Is it good as adorable and delightful... But our second great problem is whether it is not forever defeated in actual existence by loveless, thoughtless power. The resurrection of Jesus Christ in power, is at one and the same time the demonstration of the power of goodness and the goodness of power.³⁵²

Realism is hopeful because it is trust in God; God is active in the world and has not given up on it, therefore hopeful realism refuses to give up on what God refuses to give up on. This hope has two components. Firstly, it is hopeful because God who is good has created us with significant abilities to work toward reconciliation in the world. It is not, however, disappointed by the fact that we cannot bring about a perfect world, we are always surrounded by brokenness and sin because, and this is the second component, because it trusts in God's ability to bring about God's kingdom in the world. Until then, we must use our God given abilities to, in H. Richard Niebuhr's words, "eliminate the weeds and till the soil so that the kingdom of God can grow."³⁵³

Hopeful

This kind of realism is hopeful, because it believes that God is active in the world as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. God does not occasionally act to miraculously redirect the course history is taking, but in all of the process and events that occur, as discussed above. As Niebuhr rightly pointed out, it is only bad theologians who are not willing to accept that God is active in the activities of finite beings. We need to look for what God is doing in a given situation and make the fitting response to God's action. With regard to war, Niebuhr describes finding hope amidst a tremendous tragedy:

We see through the use of the great parable how bodies are being broken for our sake and how for the remission of our sins the blood of innocents is being shed. Not with complete clarity, to be sure, yet as in a glass darkly, we can discern in the contemporary confusion of our lives the evidence of a pattern

³⁵² (Niebuhr 1989), 100.

³⁵³ (Niebuhr 1932), 21.

in which, by great travail of men and God a work of redemption goes on which is like the work of Christ. We learn to know what we are doing and what is being done to us – how by an infinite suffering of the eternal victim we are condemned and forgiven at the same time; how an infinite loyalty refuses to abandon us either to evil or to nothingness, but works at our salvation with a tenacity we are tempted to deplore. The story of Jesus, and particularly of his passion, is the great illustration that enables us to say, “What we are now doing and suffering is like this.”³⁵⁴

As discussed above, Jesus’ passion enables us to understand war as both judgement and crucifixion – but judgement cannot be separated from redemption nor can crucifixion be separated from resurrection. If we believe that God is active in all of the events in the world and that God’s activity is transformative, then we must remain hopeful. The question however, briefly touched upon above, of locating this activity of God, must now be more fully discussed.

Niebuhr differentiated between external and internal history and then located God’s activity in internal history while not denying God’s presence in external history. I argued above that we should reject this distinction in favour of a more perspectival understanding of history. According to this model, there is an ultimate reality, to use Niebuhr’s phrase, which includes objective history *an sich*. We, however, do not have access to this God’s-eye view of history; we can only see part of this ultimate reality. Our seeing always involves an interpretation of the ultimate reality. This understanding is closely related to Niebuhr’s discussion of human activity as discussed above. It has four elements: first, all of our actions are *responses*; second, our responses are responses to our *interpretations* of prior action upon us; third, we are *accountable* for our actions in that we must act in anticipation of responses to our action; fourth, all of our actions are done in *social solidarity* with others, in other words, in a continuing discourse. This continuing discourse provides a major check on our actions, as others respond to our actions, approving or disapproving of them.

Locating God’s activity in ultimate history allows for a plurality of interpretations of this activity. Since the first question of ethics must be what is happening and, more specifically, what is God doing here and now, we must use as

³⁵⁴ (Niebuhr 1941), 91.

many sources as possible to understand what is happening. We cannot limit these sources to Scripture or the Church or Christians. They provide a tool that helps us to interpret these events and a standard of judgement for understanding our options in a given situation, but we cannot discover what we ought to do solely by reading the Bible. Indeed, we will need to refer to as many different sources as possible – including different religious perspectives, non-religious perspectives, historical, economic, political, anthropological and other sources. This does not mean all information is relevant or correct, as we check it against our own and other's interpretation and weigh the different interpretations out against each other. These checks are not limited merely to our contemporaries but must include those who have gone before us in our tradition. Thus, Christians must look not only to other contemporaries facing the same or a similar situation, but also to those throughout history who have interpreted their situation so that they and their interpretations and decisions have become a part of our tradition. We also cannot limit ourselves to those within our tradition, but must also look to those outside of it to see how they interpreted their situation and responded to it. If we believe God is active in history, then we cannot limit that activity to one particular interpretation of it. Others interpret their history and situation in a different way, yet may still be responding to God in their decisions. In looking to these sources, contemporary and historical, from our tradition and from outside of it, we then have a basis on which to make moral decisions.

Not all of the sources we look to will be helpful or true for our situation. In this dialogue between different sources and traditions, we must be careful in what we use to inform our decision-making. There must be consistency within the sources we use, with a priority being given to our own tradition. It may be that our tradition is wrong, and that we need to change part of our heritage. Some examples of this include the Church's position with regard to slavery and the role of women. The tradition must be flexible enough to allow for growth. Yet, our decisions remain our decisions, so that if we belong to a specific tradition such as Reformed Christianity or Hinduism or Islam, we ought to respond to our interpretations of events in a way that is consistent with those from our tradition who have gone before. For Christians, the primary authority from our tradition is the Bible. The exact nature of that

authority is different for different members of Christian traditions. Nevertheless, our thinking must be informed in a decisive way by that source.

It is easier to look back for God's activity in history than it is to see God's work in current events. This is unfortunate, but does not release us from the obligation of attempting to see God's activity around us and respond to it. It may be that we merely strive to understand what is happening and try to respond accordingly in the hope that, by so doing, we are responding to God's activity. It is this that Luther has in mind when he says, "Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly."³⁵⁵ Hope is graceful hope, because it depends not on human ability or understanding, but on the good God who is faithful to God's creation.

Realism

Both Barth and Niebuhr remain realistic in their theology and ethics in recognizing human sinfulness in the world and in recognizing the destructive nature of war. This is crucial for any ethics that attempts to take the situation seriously for ethical decision-making. This realism also includes their description of war. As Barth put it:

To handle morality neither skillfully nor unskillfully, but to realize soberly and realistically that actualisation of the will to power is what politics and especially war is all about, is the first concrete task of ethical reflection on war. This does not mean that war is ethically condemned but that *it is seen in its true reality. This must be the presupposition of all else.* Obviously we will accept the ethical possibility of war less lightheartedly when we tell ourselves – when the nations learn to tell themselves – that it is not so much for the so-called supreme values but for coal and potash and the rest that soldiers have to shoot at one another as "enemies." We may still have to accept the need for this, but probably, as is to be desired, with greatly damped-down enthusiasm. ... The second ethical task is to realize no less relentlessly that the actualising of the will for power in war – there may be other forms – means that soldiers (certainly at the risk of their own lives, but that is not the point) must diligently and carefully shoot at enemy soldiers.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁵ LW 48, 281-82.

³⁵⁶ (Barth 1981), 159-160.

Thus realism must include a realistic appraisal of the situation. This requires that we look to as many sources as possible in order to understand our situation. In the case of war, this requires us to look to all possible sources for information, including military, historical, religious, anthropological, and sociological sources. We must also listen to what different persons and groups who are involved in the situation are saying. At the same time, we need to be aware that not everything we hear is truthful or relevant to the situation. Thus we need to balance out the material and compare it to other material in order to reach an informed understanding of the circumstances. This involves looking at the sources to see how reliable they have been in the past and understanding what their perspective is on the current situation. These facts have to be verified or disproven in dialogue with others. There are two reasons for this: firstly, all perspectives on ultimate reality are biased by our own point of view – no one has a God’s eye view of events, all our knowing is relative. That is not to say that our knowledge is merely a construct, but that our knowledge is not absolute. At the same time, we all to a greater or lesser extent colour our understanding of events in order to make our point more forcefully, leaving out information that may not support our view. This may or may not be intentional, we may be deceiving ourselves or we may be using propaganda to deceive someone into supporting our position.

Realism also involves an honest appraisal of ourselves and our reasons for acting in a certain way. We must constantly ask ourselves why we are acting in a certain way in a given situation. As sinfulness is so persuasive, we must repent of those actions where we have acted sinfully and then change our actions. Realism requires that we acknowledge that we are no more righteous than anyone else. This is especially true in times of war, when the temptation is almost irresistible for one State to portray itself as “righteous” against the evil of the “unrighteous” enemy. Such an understanding of war ignores the fact that all States are guilty of acting during peacetime to bring about a situation that can only be solved by war. In such a situation, it is true that one side makes the final act that leads to the outbreak of a “hot” war, but all States act during the “cold” war during peacetime so that military action becomes inevitable. One can argue that the cause of World War Two was the

German invasion of Poland, to which the British and French responded by declaring war, but that is a distortion of the events leading up to the war. One must look further back in history to find the manifold causes that led up to the war, including the problems from the Franco-Prussian War, World War One and the Versailles Treaty that ended the Great War, the problems with German reparations during the Weimar Republic and the events of the 1930's. The outbreak of the Second World War thus does not provide an opportunity for anyone of the Allied nations to demonstrate their righteousness, it rather shows their narrow-sightedness and sinfulness. Opposed to this self-aggrandising self-understanding, as Niebuhr put it, in all of the Allied actions in this war

... there will be in them no effort to establish a righteousness of our own, no excusing of self because one has fallen less short of the glory of God than others; there will be no vengeance in them. They will also share one positive characteristic: they will be performed in hope, in reliance on the continued grace of God in the midst of our ungraciousness.³⁵⁷

Symbolic Understanding of Life

As discussed above, human beings attempt to organise their experience by means of symbols. Niebuhr wrote:

What is the general idea in such interpretation of ourselves as *symbolic* more than as *rational* animals? I believe, this: that we are far more image-making and image using creatures than we usually think ourselves to be and, further, that our processes of perception and conception, or organizing and understanding the signs that come to us in our dialogue with the circumambient world, are guided and formed by images in our minds. Our languages, we are reminded, are symbolic systems.³⁵⁸

Humans attempt to interpret their world, their own experiences and their choices by means of patterns they find in their experiences and in the history of groups they identify with. The patterns one finds in the world are a result of that person's centre

³⁵⁷ (Niebuhr 1943), 70.

³⁵⁸ (Niebuhr 1963), 151-152.

of value, as described above in the section on Niebuhr's ethics. Most people are polytheists in that they have many different centres of value for different situations. These centres tend to involve loyalties, such as a parent's love for their child or a doctor's concern for the medical well being of his or her patients. This centre then leads us to discover patterns in our experience, such as the medical doctor who sees a pattern in our ability to treat illness by means of medication discovered through scientific research. Some of these patterns are then used to illumine other experiences and become symbols, such as the symbol of the Fatherland for a patriot or the symbol of nature for the environmentalist: all experiences are understood by means of this symbol, so that a situation and the possibilities for action within that situation are interpreted to be good or bad on the presumed effect it will have on one's country or based on the effect it will have on the environment. The use of these symbols requires that we use our imagination in seeking to understand the situation, as Niebuhr discussed, and this is like the scientist who understands certain phenomena by means of others. Most people have many different symbols for different situations and may well use more than one to illumine any situation, as the working person who is trying to decide whether to take a job in a different city. They would look at the result of a choice for their own career and for their social life; if they have a family, then the symbol of their family's well being would also be considered. The symbols we use do not tell us what we ought to do in any situation; they rather – like Barth's understanding of the Ten Commandments – provide boundaries within which human activity ought to take place. However, unlike Barth's boundaries, the symbols also have a positive influence on our moral decision making as they provide us with tools to better understand ourselves and our world, so that we can choose the more fitting response to God's action. The question is what symbols does a person use to organise reality and how appropriate are they. There are four main checks to these symbols: they must be open to modification; they must be sufficient to explain our experience; these symbols must be confirmed, modified or rejected by other members of our community; the symbols must also be subject to criticism from those who do not share in our community and its symbols.

Firstly, the symbols we use to interpret reality must be open to modification. There are two interrelated reasons for this: a rigid, closed system would require that

we can completely understand not only a specific situation, which is in itself a problematic assumption, but also that we understand all situations that have occurred, are occurring and will occur. Even if one used symbols that related only to specific types of events, this would be a daunting task. Such understanding is clearly not possible, as we are not capable of this level of knowledge. At the same time, a rigid system fails to account for unexplainable and random elements inherent in every situation. In use, we would tend to impose these types of symbols onto a situation and exclude thereby aspects of that situation which do not fit the symbol, rather than using the symbol to help us make sense of what is happening. At best our understanding of any situation is limited, as are the patterns we see in it and the symbols we use to understand it; therefore, the symbols we use must always be subject to further modification.

The second point is clearly related to the first: if the symbols we use do not enable us to better understand our experiences and history, they must either be modified or discarded. If a symbol does not help us understand what is happening, it would seem to follow, that pattern is not present in our experience. The purpose of these symbols is to illumine our experiences and the options open to us in a given situation. If they fail to do this, they lose their value as symbols and must be discarded or modified, or else they become idols. The symbols are therefore also to be judged pragmatically. Again, as with the first point, this must be the case because of our limited ability to comprehend our experiences and choices.

The symbols we use are determined in community with others and must therefore be subject to their criticism. This clearly follows from the first two points: if we cannot fully comprehend a situation because of our limited epistemological ability, we therefore must strive to better understand the circumstances. In order to this, we ought to talk to as many other persons as possible who either are facing the same situation or have dealt with a similar situation in the past. We also need to look to historical sources to better understand the situation and to better judge the appropriateness of our symbols. In examining our symbols in conversation with others, we learn how better to understand our situation, our options and are aided in our moral decision-making.

The criticism of our symbols ought not be limited to those who belong to the same group and use the same symbols as we do. Rather, we need to be open to a variety of different perspectives. This enriches our understanding and the symbols we use. However, we should not merely accept other symbols with our own. There is room for a kind of apologetics here as we strive to find symbols that better help us with moral decision making. The discussion must be neither simple acceptance of other's symbols nor an absolute intolerance of them, but a constructive dialogue between persons with different understandings and perspectives on reality. There are incompatible perspectives and symbols, there are also evil symbols that lead to the destruction of communities. There are also a large number of merely different symbols that help those who use them to understand life and to make choices in the situations they face. It is important in all circumstances, but especially in a conflict situation, to understand the symbols people are using. Only by doing so can one make a fitting response in that situation.

Christian Symbols

The central conviction for theological social ethics is that God is active in history. It is to God's primary activity that we must respond in order for our action to be considered good. This divine activity is not merely occasional miraculous "course-corrections" of human history; God rather acts through the actions of other, finite beings. The question for Christian ethics is therefore: "How do we interpret God's activity in the current situation?"

The symbols we use to interpret reality must therefore remain theocentric, consistent with the conviction of God's activity in history, yet be accessible to human understanding. Therefore, these symbols must be revealed to us, not determined by our understanding. Niebuhr's definition of revelation seems applicable here:

Revelation means for us that part of our inner history which illuminates the rest of it and which is in itself intelligible... 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 on our history. Revelation means the intelligible event which makes all other events intelligible.³⁵⁹

As discussed in the fourth chapter, we need to modify Niebuhr’s understanding of internal and external history, so that rather than speaking of that “part of our inner history,” we would prefer to say “that event in ultimate reality that we, from our perspective, understand as illuminating the rest of it.” Nonetheless, this provides us with symbols that we can use to understand reality while avoiding anthropocentrism. This is especially true if we bear Barth’s anhypostatic – enhypostatic Christology in mind. Thus, God acted in Jesus in “ultimate reality,” but that can only be understood when one is given the faith to see or, to continue using perspectival language, when one receives by grace the ability to share in the perspective that allows for Jesus to be unveiled as the Son of God. From this revelation of God, our own experiences are illumined and we are aided in our understanding of ourselves and our relations with others.

Therefore, Christians must make some additions to the above criteria. The most important is that the symbols we use must be given to us by God and not of our own making; in other words, our symbols must be *theocentric* and not *anthropocentric*. As both Barth and Niebuhr compellingly argue, it is an usurpation of God’s authority when we believe that we can determine good and evil; the symbols we use provide tools for understanding our circumstances and, thereby, for seeing the evil and good in our situation. Thus, the symbols we use must be revealed by God to us, yet in such a way that we can rationally use them to understand ourselves and our world. As we use the symbols, our understanding of them increases and we learn better how to fittingly respond to God’s activity. This use of the symbols then become a part of the tradition and a part of the revelation, as later generations look at prior uses of their symbols. In this way, the Christian centre of value, to use Niebuhr’s term, remains the God who is revealed to us in Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. The symbols we use as Christians are drawn from

³⁵⁹ (Niebuhr 1941) 68-69.

this revelation but cannot become in themselves the centre of value, as the symbols would then become henotheistic idols.

A further criterion is that the symbols we use must support and nourish community and not destroy it. This is an extension of the above criteria concerning a community's criticism of the symbols we use and how we use them. Since Christians understand the world and all that is in it as God's creation, all of creation has value because it is God's creation. Douglas Ottati refers to this as "God's great commonwealth of being."³⁶⁰ This has major ramifications for any discussion about war, as we will see below. All of creation has value *not* because of its use or any other intrinsic property, but because of the God who created it and all reality. Any symbol that denies or damages the fellowship must be rejected; those that support this commonwealth are to be encouraged.

It follows from this that any symbols that encourage us to abdicate our responsibility in the world must also be rejected. We can have been given, by the grace of God, significant abilities to shape the world, as the invention of nuclear weapons demonstrates.³⁶¹ If we understand all that is, including ourselves, as being created and sustained by God, then all being is interrelated in "God's commonwealth of being" and we must acknowledge this interconnectedness. As we acknowledge that God has given us significant abilities to interact with our environment, we need to use these abilities responsibly.

Hopeful realism acknowledges the fact that humans have the ability to shape their environment and change what is happening, but also acknowledges that human abilities are limited. The kingdom of God will only be brought about by God's activity, not our own. This means we act in order to build a better world only in response to God's reconciling activity in the world. Our action is witness to God's action, as Niebuhr put it:

³⁶⁰ See (Ottati 1999) 43 and 105-107.

³⁶¹ Gordon Kaufman argues that "The stark fact of *total human responsibility for the earthly future of humanity*, which a potential nuclear catastrophe symbolises, calls into question all this traditional talk – held together so tightly and meaningfully in the symbol of the divine sovereignty – of God's power and purposes and love as the proper and only adequate ground for hope in our desperate situation." See (Kaufman 1985) 8. We do not agree with Kaufman that the traditional symbols of God's love and providence, indeed of a personal God, should be rejected; however, as Kaufman rightly indicates, our ability to create nuclear weapons (our ability is clearly not limited to that, but it provides a potent symbol of our potential) does require that we rethink the tradition symbols in Christian theology.

Man's task is not that of building Utopias but that of eliminating the weeds and tilling the soil so that the kingdom of God can grow. His method is not one of striving for perfection or of acting perfectly, but of clearing the road by repentance and forgiveness. That this approach is valid for societies as well as for individuals and that the opposite approach will always involve in the same one ceaseless cycle of assertion and counter-assertion, is what I am concerned to emphasize.³⁶²

Sinful activity, however, will also always be a part of our experience until God brings God's kingdom into being. Douglas Ottati described this when he stated that the contemporary witness to the gospel

...will claim that sin and grace, judgment and reconciliation belong together. It [hopeful realism] will insist that we ought not deceive ourselves and yet that we ought never to give up hope. It will say that we ought to denounce and restrain corruption, but also that we ought to announce and pursue promising possibilities for genuine communion and renewal. It will push us to move beyond a naïve optimism and defensive pessimism. It will encourage us to become hopeful realists.³⁶³

We must therefore act in the world to bring about genuine reconciliation, while recognising that we never can succeed and trusting that God will bring about God's kingdom in God's own time. We thus hope that our activity will bring about good and trust that God will act within history to bring about God's kingdom.

Sin, understood on this basis, involves a constricting of one's area of concern. If we believe that all being has value on the basis of its relationship to God, and if we believe that God is active in history working for reconciliation, then we cannot limit our area of concern to simply ourselves, our family or our nation. This, in Niebuhr's terms, henotheism is idolatrous as we take one created and finite aspect of our experience and make it the centre of value by which everything else is judged. As this centre is finite, it must exclude parts of the universe. In this way, henotheism is also unrealistic, as it cannot provide us with assistance in interpreting all of our experience. As Christians understand all being as created by God and dependent on God for its continued existence, God provides a centre of value that can enable us to

³⁶² (Niebuhr 1932), 21.

³⁶³ (Ottati 1999), 96-97.

see all of reality as belonging to the commonwealth of being. God thereby also enables us to interpret all of our experience without exclusion. As sinful beings whose vision and understanding is limited by idolatrous henotheism, we are unable to perfectly interpret our experience and respond appropriately to God's activity in it.

If we argue that God, the source of all being, is our centre of value, we can no longer judge value as value to us, but must recognize that everything has value because of its relationship to the good God who gave it being. In terms of war, we can no longer say that a particular war is not our concern, as we have no economic or military interests in that area. This does not mean a nation must intervene in all wars occurring at this moment in history; it does, however, mean that a State must look at all military actions occurring and decide what, if anything, ought to be done. There is no war that can be ignored simply because it is in an area of the world that has no relevance to this State.

Hopeful realistic ethics does not replace teleological ethics, nor does it replace deontological ethics. It rather includes them as appropriate responses to certain types of action upon us. Deontological ethics, in order to be theocentric and not anthropocentric, cannot provide us with a list of rules we can use to determine the proper action. Barth's rejection of this kind of casuistic ethics is persuasive. However, as Barth also argues, there are certain boundaries within which our action, if it is to be good, must take place. Consequently, there are certain actions that are not moral under any circumstances. With regards to war, any offensive military action used for the aggrandisement of one's own State at the expense of another or for vengeful reasons is clearly immoral. It is also important, as will become evident below, that any violation of treaty obligations must also be rejected. This does not allow any other State to claim to be righteous in going to war as a response to another State's military, self-aggrandising activity. No one individual nor State can claim to be speaking for God nor to be righteous before God.

It is important to remember that God acts within history and not from the outside; God does not occasionally change the direction of history by a supernatural act. God is rather in the process of history as discussed above, this is the reason realism must remain hopeful. Since, as Niebuhr persuasively argued, the first ethical question must be "What is happening?" and the moral action in any situation is the

response the fits with God's prior activity, this question can be further specified for Christians to be "What is God doing in the current situation?" It may be, as Barth argued, that God is commanding us to go to war in a given situation. There is, however, the prior question of how we come to that conclusion or, in other words, what is happening in the current situation that leads us to the conclusion that God is commanding us to go to war. It is to this question that Barth fails to provide a convincing answer.

With the above discussion in mind, we now turn to the ethics of war.

The Ethics of War

As Christian symbols must be based on God's revelation in Jesus Christ as discussed above, the symbols can best be understood in Trinitarian terms under the subheadings of God the Creator, God the Redeemer and God the Sustainer.

God the Creator

All being is understood as valuable because of its relationship to God. In other words, the understanding of God as Creator provides us with one symbol for understanding war which has implications for our actions, both *ad bellum* and *in bello*, the symbol of concern for being in general. It is important to note that this is not a criterion for determining what we ought to do; it rather ought to be a characteristic for our thinking with regard to war. In considering whether or not to go to war, we must consider the results of our action or inaction for those involved. This includes not just the people involved, but also environmental issues, a concern which increased dramatically in importance after the invention of atomic and chemical weaponry. We must attempt to foresee what the result of a possible action will be. Since we are limited, finite beings, we cannot *know* what will occur as a result of our action, yet we must at least attempt to the best of our ability to determine what would probably happen. It is here that we can see how hopeful realism, as is the case with Niebuhr's ethics of response, does not replace teleological ethics but subsumes it as

one part of its ethical thinking. The moral response in a given situation is the response that is fitting with God's activity in the situation.

Because Christians understand that all that is has been created by God, they also believe all being has value and is interdependent with all that is. We cannot absolve ourselves of moral responsibility because of a lack of national interest in a given conflict. Our national security, our economic well-being, or the lives of the citizens of our State, can not be given any greater moral weight than other threatened beings, including other States and individuals, or the environment, or the impoverishment of others. In this sense, teleologic ethics remains relevant to moral reasoning concerning war, as we must consider what the results of a given action or inaction will be for the well being of all who will be affected by any given action. This also means that we must not consider ourselves as the centre of value, as this would in Niebuhrian terms be a form of henotheism and a constriction of our area of concern; in Barthian terms this would be idolatrous.³⁶⁴

Concern for being in general also provides Christians with a very strong desire to avoid war. It is hard to reconcile the destruction that war brings with it with a concern for all that is. Pacifist here are right in recognising that the brutality and destruction that war involves is inconsistent with the Christian understanding of God as Creator. Yet, there are times when the only way to preserve life is by destroying it. This is the tragic nature of sinful human existence. There are times when the decision to go to war is the faithful response to God's action. But it is a decision that is never to be taken lightly or self-righteously.

God the Reconciler

As "in Christ God was reconciling the world to Godself," (II Corinthians 5:19, NRSV) our actions must be fitting to God's action of reconciliation. This

³⁶⁴ Richard B. Miller makes a similar point concerning Niebuhr in his article, "H. Richard Niebuhr's War Articles: A Transvaluation of Value" when he writes: "Niebuhr's dissatisfaction with the Christian discourse about the war in the 1930s and 1940s led him to chart an alternative course, one in which repentance to divine judgment, not moral action, is axiomatic." (243) Although we agree with Miller that Niebuhr wants to displace the self from the centre of our moral reasoning, this is a reinterpretation of moral action and not a displacement of it in favour of repentance to divine judgement. See: (Miller 1988)

provides a further symbol for our thinking concerning our response to war. In situations of conflict, we must strive to foster reconciliation amongst the adversaries. Understood in this way, the Treaty of Versailles can be understood as evil, leading to alienation amongst peoples. Teleologically, it does not seem not only to be an inappropriate response to God's reconciling activity in the world, it is directly opposed to it.

Niebuhr used two symbols to understand war: the judgment of God and Jesus' crucifixion. Judgment must be understood not in terms of vengeance or retribution but as "the corrective action of a God who is loyal to his creatures."³⁶⁵ The judgment is, as discussed above, not directed to one State which is to be punished by another, but against the sinfulness of all States. One of the main problems with the traditional just-war theory is its assumption that one State is just in its decision to go to war to punish an unjust State. If we follow Romans, "...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23, NRSV) then any understanding of war that involves one just State punishing an unjust must be rejected. In war, God is passing judgment on all humanity, not just the people of one nation. In practice, it is hard to see how this could be otherwise. The just nation must assume that the entire population of the unjust nation is to be punished – including those who had no say in the events which lead up to war, such as children, as the suffering brought about by war strikes not only those in power or those who bear arms, but the entire population. At the same time, the population of the just State also suffers as a result of the war. God is judging all humanity in war, regardless of the relative justice or injustice of a nation. It is true that World War Two started when Nazi Germany invaded Poland in 1939. It would however be wrong to say that that is the sole reason for the outbreak of war. The question a nation needs to ask itself in that time is what have we done to bring about this state of affairs, of what must we repent in response to God's judgment. The decisions a State makes concerning war must be based on this repentance, not on any feeling of self-righteousness.

War, as Niebuhr rightly noted, is like crucifixion in two main ways. Firstly, there is an intermixture of justice and injustice amongst both victims and the authorities. Two of those crucified were guilty (presumably) of crimes against the

³⁶⁵ (Niebuhr 1942) 59

Roman Empire; the third was not guilty of the charge against him but, even there, ambiguously as Jesus did come to bring about a new kingdom. The crucifiers included Roman soldiers who were obeying orders, Jewish leaders who were trying to the best of their ability to serve Israel and other leaders who wanted to maintain the status quo and, thereby, their own power. Similarly, as Niebuhr wrote:

War is like that – apparently indiscriminate in the choice of victims and victors, whether these be thought of individuals or as communities.³⁶⁶

Thus, in Jesus' crucifixion and in our experience of war, we are faced with the fact that the universe we live in does not seem reducible to one which is ordered by a system of retributive justice.

War is also like crucifixion in that it does not make for moral indifference. It is as a result of our sinfulness that God's Son was crucified; it is also as a result of human sinfulness that wars occur, with all of the suffering they bring with them. Rather leading us to moral indifference, war shows the importance of our moral decisions by the results that our decisions have. If through a State's action or inaction an indiscriminate number of people, regardless of their relative moral goodness, are going to suffer, we need to take our decisions very seriously.

We cannot understand God's redemption as being limited to any one nation or group, as "...in Christ God was reconciling *the world* to Godself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." (II Corinthians 5:19) Redemption involves a restoration of the proper relationship between God and humanity and humans with each other and the world. This reconciliation is fulfilled only in Jesus Christ; our action can only be witness and response to God's reconciling action in Jesus Christ. Our action, however, is nonetheless important. In war, we must not seek vengeance but to rebuild relationships in the light of God's reconciliation in Jesus Christ. Failure to do so can have tragic results, as the Treaty of Versailles so vividly shows. We will return to this below when we discuss the Kosovo conflict.

³⁶⁶ (Niebuhr 1943) 66

God the Sustainer

Finally, we must also understand war in the light of God's sustaining activity. As above, God's activity in the world means that Christians must remain hopeful, as they believe that God will bring about God's will for the world. Thus war is not and can never be considered the normal state of affairs in the world but only a not-inevitable result of human sinfulness. As such, we must act in hope because we are convinced that it is God who sustains God's good creation; we do not. We can witness to the activity, but we are not and can never consider ourselves to be the primary actors in this sustaining of the world. This is the reason for Christian's hope, as discussed above.

This understanding of God is clearly related to the understanding of God as Creator. It is perhaps most relevant to decisions made about the conduct within a war. If God is the Sustainer of all Creation, we must be very careful about destroying any part of God's good creation. Our decisions must be done in concern for the continued existence and well-being of all that is, not just a limited part of it. As discussed above, it may be that we have to go to war, which results in the destruction of much of the world. But that decision must be made out of a concern for the well-being of creation.

Actions in war that wilfully destroy creation must therefore be considered wrong. With regard to nuclear weapons, it is hard to see how their use could be justified, as both Barth and H. Richard Niebuhr recognised. Understanding God's activity as that of sustaining creation provides an aid to decision making for *ius in bello* moral decision making, as our actions ought to destroy as little as possible or necessary to accomplish. This concern must not be limited to the effect my actions have on my nation or people, nor may it be limited to human being, but as we consider God the Sustainer of all being we must also be concerned with all being, not just one limited part of it. As God sustains all of God's creation, we must act in such a way that also is sustaining for it. This is never more true than during times of war.

Using these symbols, then we can interpret situations of conflict. One of the strengths of this understanding is that as the situations change, the application of the symbols can also change. This is not to say that the symbols are determined by the

situation, but that as we use them in conversation with others we learn how better to appropriate them and their meaning for our understanding of the world. As situations change, different elements of the symbols are emphasized to a greater or lesser extent. Since Barth and Niebuhr wrote concerning World War Two, the political situation has changed dramatically. There are no longer several States of relatively equal power, but various constellations of power dominated by the one remaining super-power. The military decisions of the United States today carry far greater weight than the military decisions of any other power. At the same time, there has been far more terrorism in the world, including within the United States. These types of activity tend to target civilians in order to achieve political concessions. Wars are no longer started escalating threat and counter-threat, culminating in a declaration of war from one power to another, but tend to result from a gradual escalation of terrorist, guerrilla actions against a group within the same State. Most military actions today are not “classic” wars between relatively equal powers but civil wars, to which other States may respond with a “peace-keeping” military action. We now turn to one recent example of such a situation, the conflict in the former Yugoslavia.

The Holocaust

Any discussion of the ethics of war following World War Two must make some account of the events of the Holocaust. That event has come to divide theological and ethical reflection into pre- and post-Holocaust thought. There are two main issues to be discussed here: what impact does the suffering of the Jews and others under the Nazi regime have for a contemporary understanding of humanitarian military intervention; and (2) if one is to argue for a hopeful realist ethics, where can we find hope in the events of the Holocaust.

In any discussion of the Holocaust, we must remain aware of the danger of merely “remembering” or “memorialising” the Holocaust – true repentance requires a change in *our current* actions. Both of these terms – “our” and “current” are vital. It is easy to understand the evil of the Holocaust as being perpetrated by Adolf Hitler and the Nazis, or even just as being a German evil from which the Allies saved the world. As Niebuhr argued, God’s judgement should not be understood as a

judgement against the other, but against us. We have to repent. If the Holocaust is understood as a German event, then there would seem to be very little for non-Germans to learn from it. On the other hand, if we understand the Holocaust as an occurrence within human history and, therefore our history, we then not only can but must learn from it. There have been many good books written on this³⁶⁷

Not all of the victims of the Holocaust were Jewish, others – Roma and Sinti, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Communists, Gays and Lesbians also were persecuted and killed by the Nazis.³⁶⁸ One must also not forget that the euthanasia policy of the Nazi’s was first used on mentally handicapped persons. That is not to say that the Jews were not central to the Nazi’s death-camp policy nor to deny in any way that the Jewish suffering under Nazi Germany was so great as to be indescribable today. For reasons discussed in the section on Barth, one of the reasons the Nazis persecuted the Jews was the Jewish belief in their being chosen by God. The Nazi policy succeeded in almost eliminating the Jewish presence in Europe. This must never be forgotten. However, there is a danger in politicising the Holocaust by understanding it solely as a “Jewish” event;³⁶⁹ the suffering of other groups must also be remembered. When this broader understanding of the victims of the Nazi’s persecution is used, the understanding of the nature of the evil that led to this suffering is necessarily also broader. The root cause of the suffering of the Jews may well have been anti-Semitism; when the victim is seen as not only having been the Jews, but also these other groups, then we must look deeper for the cause of this suffering. One of the roots of this evil is a type of thinking in which we understand others as external and separate from ourselves and our “group” – be it a group based on racial, religious, national or sexuality differences. From this initial separation into groups, it is a small step to believe that one’s own group is better than the others. This broadening of the understanding of the victims of Holocaust also broadens its relevance today.

³⁶⁷ For example, (Feld 1994), which argues for a return to holiness even in events such as the Holocaust; (Jones 1999) discusses the issue of individual responsibility in “large-scale historical event.”

³⁶⁸ For information about the Roma victims, see the website <http://www.geocities.com/Paris/5121/holocaust.htm>; for information about the gay and lesbian victims, see (Schoppman 1999) and (Grau and Schoppmann 1995).

³⁶⁹ This point has been much contested in recent discussions concerning memorials to the homosexual victims of Nazi persecution. See, for example (Cowell 1996) and (Jäckel 2000).

There are other dangerous ways in which many memorialise the Holocaust. Although, as many argue, the purpose of memorialising the Holocaust is to sensitise us to the dangers of genocide and, hopefully prevent it from reoccurring, it is also the case that by memorialising the Holocaust we desensitise ourselves. Many reprehensible actions by governments can be ignored because they are not as horrible as the Holocaust was. In some cases, these memorials are used to cover our own sins. A memorial is erected to the Holocaust in Washington D. C., although there is no memorial to the slaves in pre-Civil War America. The author Peter Novick made this point in a recent television program concerning the interpretation of the Holocaust:

One of my criticisms of the focus on Holocaust memory in the United States, and this is very different from Holocaust memory in Germany, is that it's cost free for Americans. There is this enormous and very well done Holocaust museum in Washington. There is no museum of slavery. What would we think of the Germans if they said, well, the Holocaust was this a really terrible thing, but what is really important is that in Berlin we build a monument to American black slavery.³⁷⁰

The purpose of remembering the Holocaust must be for nations to repent of their own sins and change their present actions. This starts on an individual level in the schools, where one studies the Holocaust to learn about the self and the other and how to relate to the other.³⁷¹ Others have made similar arguments about current political and military intervention, such as Elie Wiesel at the opening of the

³⁷⁰ (Yule 1993)

³⁷¹ For one excellent example of this type of program, see the *Facing History and Ourselves* website: <http://www.facing.org/facing/fhao2.nsf>. This is an organisation that teaches pupils about the Holocaust in such a way that they learn about themselves and the other. From the website: For students, the journey officially begins with an exploration of the complex issues around individual identity, starting with such questions as: Who am I? How do I define myself? How do I define others? They learn how identity is linked to decision-making, and to discuss the impact that choices made by individuals have on society. The journey then broadens to an exploration of identity as it relates to groups and nations. How does a nation define itself? Who decides who belongs and who doesn't? With that foundation, students learn how issues of identity and membership, inclusion and exclusion, play out at one particular moment in history. During this part of the journey, students engage in a rigorous investigation of Germany's transition from a democracy to a totalitarian regime. They see how the Nazis rose to power, culminating in the horrors of the Holocaust. Throughout, students confront the moral questions inherent in this history and discover that even the smallest choices can, indeed, make a difference. Focusing on the role of the individual in history, students then consider the question: Who was responsible? Finally, they reflect on their own roles as citizens in a democracy, and embark on what we hope is a life-long commitment to responsible participation in the world, to continually asking, "How can I make a difference?"

Holocaust Museum in Washington D. C. Wiesel spoke immediately after President Bill Clinton and, about half way through his speech, said

Mr. President, I cannot not tell you something. I have been in the former Yugoslavia, last fall. I cannot sleep since what I have seen. As a Jew, I am saying that. We must do something to stop the bloodshed in that country.³⁷²

The Holocaust and Humanitarian Military Intervention

As both Niebuhr and Barth argued, humanitarian intervention is morally a possibility but not a moral obligation. It may be that other means are better for aiding those being unjustly oppressed. Whether or not to intervene militarily must have as one of its primary concerns realistically aiding those who are suffering. A henotheistic methodology that argues for or against humanitarian intervention on the basis of the benefit our country will attain is clearly therefore to be rejected. In the same way, our relationship with the peoples involved can also not be of primary importance – it may well be that a nation with whom we have a good relationship is oppressing a group with whom we have a poor relationship. The decision concerning intervention must be made realistically; there may be cases (as Manchuria was for Niebuhr) where one may want to intervene but that intervention may be useless or even counter-productive. There can be no fixed rules concerning military intervention, such as that when genocide is threatened, we must intervene militarily. Other responses to humanitarian threats may well be preferable. South Africa provides a good case for this. Military intervention was not seriously considered as a response to apartheid, as it is difficult to see how this would have helped alleviate the suffering there. Nonetheless, a response from the international community was necessary in the face of such a racist system. The complete boycott seems to have been the proper response as it led, albeit over a long period of time, to the eradication of apartheid.

As an aid to determining the proper response to a humanitarian crisis, one must ask what has caused a government or group to seek to destroy a particular

³⁷² Shown on the television program (Yule 1993).

ethnic group. This is important as Barth discussed concerning World War Two³⁷³ in that the Nazi decision to classify Jews as non-human and other groups as sub-human³⁷⁴ was symptomatic of the demonic in the Nazi government and was not itself, as evil as it was, the actual demonic. The Nazis rejected the existence of the Jewish people on ideological grounds, and had the capability (technological and moral) to carry out their will against the Jewish people. The understanding of the nature of the government that is oppressing a group of people is important as an aid to deciding about the use of force.

Hopefulness in the Light of the Holocaust

Discussing hopefulness in relation to the Holocaust is very dangerous. Those who did not themselves experience that tragedy must be careful in any discussion of hope. Hope cannot be described as an obligation to the victims of the Holocaust. Those who did not experience the terror of the Holocaust have no right to tell those who did about the hope they should have had. The events in the Nazi death camps defy description, and any attempt to ascribe some hope to those events fails to see this reality clearly. How, then, are to discuss “hopeful realism” in the shadow of Auschwitz?

Christian theology maintains that God is present in all history; therefore, God was present in the suffering of the Holocaust. This presence does not mean causing the event to happen, nor creating a greater good out of the suffering. These types of understanding make the suffering to be less than real suffering. If it is argued that God caused the Holocaust to happen, then either God is the author of evil or the Holocaust was not evil. Christianity historically has argued that God is good, thereby rejecting the argument that God can cause evil. If it is argued that the suffering of the Holocaust brought about some greater good, such as the founding of Israel or the United Nations or some technological advancement, the suffering of the innocent

³⁷³ See the discussion of the “Ethics of World War Two” in the chapter on Barth above.

³⁷⁴ (Rubenstein and Roth 1987), 5: “The Nazis planned brutal treatment for groups they labeled ‘subhuman,’ such as the Slavs and Gypsies, but to advance their aims they degraded the Jews to ‘nonhuman’ status.”

becomes instrumentalised to serve others. No benefit, however great, can justify the suffering of innocent persons. It may be that God is present as Elie Wiesel described a well-known passage from his book *Night*:

One day when we [Jewish prisoners in Auschwitz] came back from work, we saw three gallows rearing up in the assembly place, three black crows. Roll call. SS all around us, machine guns trained: the traditional ceremony. Three victims in chains – and one of them, the little servant, the sad-eyed angel.

The SS seemed more preoccupied, more disturbed than usual. To hang a young boy in front of thousands of spectators was no light matter. The head of the camp read the verdict. All eyes were on the child. He was lividly pale, almost calm, biting his lips. The gallows threw its shadow over him.

This time the Lagerkapo refused to act as executioner. Three SS replaced him.

The three victims mounted together on the chairs.

The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses.

“Long live liberty!” cried the two adults.

But the child was silent.

“Where is God? Where is He?” someone behind me asked.

At a sign from the head of the camp. The three chairs were tipped over.

Total silence throughout the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting.

“Bare your heads!” yelled the head of the camp. His voice was raucous. We were weeping.

“Cover your heads!”

Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues had swollen, blue-tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive. ...

For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed.

Behind me, I heard the same man asking:

“Where is God now?”

And I heard a voice within me answer him:

“Where is He? Here He is – He is hanging here on this gallows. ...”

That night the soup tasted of corpses.³⁷⁵

God’s presence, to those outside the suffering, may be interpreted as God’s judgment and a call to repentance – our sinful actions have results in the world, we need to repent of the evil we have done. The fact that we can at least in theory repent of the evil we have done in the past, in such a way as to change our present actions, is one

³⁷⁵ (Wiesel 1960), 71-72.

way, as Niebuhr argued, that God is present in the Holocaust. This does not instrumentalise the suffering of the innocent by arguing that God is not responsible for causing them to suffer in order to call the nations of the world to repentance. The death and destruction that occurred in the Nazi camps and, indeed, in the whole war was brought about solely by us. It was our sinfulness, our moral failing that caused that suffering to happen. The suffering of the innocent during the Holocaust is a judgement of our sinfulness. There is no way to escape this. Yet, Christians understand this judgement to be God's judgement and, therefore, to be not merely judgement but also a call to repentance. We can only interpret the Holocaust as "hopeful" today when we truly repent of the sinfulness that led to the Holocaust. Repentance necessitates a change our current action – not only do we admit that our actions in the past were morally wrong and had disastrous consequences, but we must change our current activity in order to prevent another Holocaust from occurring. It is in this way that the Holocaust is properly remembered and that, in the light of the Holocaust, we can be hopeful.

The Balkan Conflict

History

To better understand how this hopefully realistic ethic of war functions in the modern situation, we will now look at the Ten Day War between Slovenia and the Serb dominated country of Yugoslavia and the events that led up to it. It is important to mention that we are not here attempting a complete analysis of the events in this very tangled affair. That would require a dissertation in itself. Our purpose here is much more limited: we will look at the events that led up to this conflict and see how a hopefully realistic ethic may have assisted in the decision making that took place. It is also important to note that, as H. Richard Niebuhr clearly stated, a State ought not claim to speak for God to another State. As Christians believe God is active in history through the actions of finite beings, we do believe that one State's actions do have meaning for what God is saying in any situation. However, no State (nor

individual) has the right to claim to speak for God to another State through their action nor, and this is more relevant for the following discussion, ought any State claim to be able to decipher what God is saying to another country in a given situation. It would, for example, be wrong for the United States and the United Kingdom to have declared that their actions in World War Two were God's acts of judgement against the evils of Nazism, thus justifying the carpet bombing campaign towards the end of the war. It would also have been wrong for a neutral country, such as Switzerland, to categorically state that the Allies are God's instrument of vengeance against the evils of Nazi Germany.

The reasons that led to the outbreak of war in Yugoslavia are difficult to trace. The country itself was formed in 1918 after World War One, when the Allies dismantled the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was originally called "The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes," a name which foretold the future problems of the country. The name was changed in 1929 to Yugoslavia. The differences between the different nations include cultural and religious traditions, with the Serbs being mostly Orthodox Christian, the Croats and Slovenians mostly Roman Catholic and a significant number of Moslems amongst the other nationalities (especially the Albanians). During World War Two the country originally declared neutrality, but after the Nazis invaded in 1941 and partitioned Yugoslavia, a puppet government was set up under the leadership of Ante Pavelic, a Croatian nationalist, and his supporters, called Utashas or Ustase. They declared the Independent State of Croatia. They set up concentration camps that interred Serbs and other opponents. It was Pavelic's declared intention to create a racially pure Croatia, free of Serbs – he sought to "kill a third, expel a third, convert a third (to Catholicism)."³⁷⁶ Serbian nationalists, who fought a guerrilla war against the Ustase, were known as the Chetnicks. A third group, the communists, led by Tito, fought against both the Ustase and the Chetnicks was known as the Partizans and was made up mostly of Serbs and Montenegrins but had significant participation from Croats, Macedonians, Slovenians, Albanians and Moslems. This is the group that eventually succeeded in freeing Yugoslavia from the Nazis and then set up the post-war government for a

³⁷⁶ (Little 1996), 93

Yugoslavia that included six republics: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia.

The political situation in Yugoslavia was completely dominated by Tito from the end of World War Two up until his death in 1980. Although Communist, Tito broke with Stalin in 1948 and tried to steer a course between West and East during the Cold War. This brought in large amounts of financial support from the West, which brought about a “prosperity that was beyond its means.”³⁷⁷ At the same time, Tito repressed any expression of national identity inside of Yugoslavia in order to maintain his own power and avoid any uprising that may have led to civil war. This was problematic, as the Serbs formed a significant majority within Yugoslavia (there were twice as many Serbs in Yugoslavia as there were Croats, the second largest nation), which Tito continually had to play one off against the other:

In his eternal battle to keep the nations on an equal footing, Tito ruthlessly suppressed any expression of resurgent nationalism. Enforcing his doctrine of “Brotherhood and Unity,” he carried out purges of Serbs, Croats and Muslims, Slovenes, Macedonians and Albanians, balancing his repression of any one nation against that of the others. Nationalist were forced into exile, where they nurtured their resentment in expatriate communities that proved fertile breeding grounds for extreme nationalism. Or they were jailed...

Tito’s Yugoslavia was divided by the different nationalities within Yugoslavia but these nations were united in their loyalty to Tito:

By the time of the promulgation of the 1974 constitution (Tito’s last), the country was decentralized to an unprecedented extent. Yet while Tito was alive, that decentralization was notional, rather than real; there were no doubts about who held the reins of power. Tito was himself a one-man single-party state...

Tito was frequently likened to a great oak tree, in the shade of whose immense branches nothing else could grow. In his last years, no heir apparent emerged. Wary of appointing a successor, Tito created a hopelessly inefficient inheritor of his mantle: the collective head of state which was to replace him was an eight-member presidency, comprising one representative from each of the six republics, and one from each of Serbia’s two autonomous provinces, Vojvodina and Kosovo. The presidency of this body would rotate annually between its members. As head of state, the eight-member presidency was also commander-in-chief of the army.³⁷⁸

³⁷⁷ (Little 1996), 28.

³⁷⁸ (Little 1996), 29.

It was hoped that the division of Serbia into three provinces would counteract the huge Serbian majority in Yugoslavia. It failed to do so. This division, however, did have the negative effect of making many Serbs feel that they were discriminated against, so that the catch-phrase “Weak Serbia, strong Yugoslavia” was accepted as axiomatic by almost all Serbs. Each of the republics was responsible for their own territorial army, while the Yugoslavia People’s Army (JNA) remained under the command of the collective head of state. This made the JNA the only group that transcended the republics boundaries. Originally, they did in fact seek to save Yugoslavia as a political unity; they were later completely taken over by the Serb leader Milosevic.

With the end of the Cold War, Western economic support collapsed and, with it, the economic stability of Yugoslavia. Thereafter, the nationalism, that had always been latently present, flared up in a violent way. Starting in 1987, Slobodan Milosevic played the Serbian nationalist card in order gain popular support and then to maintain his power.³⁷⁹ He was a leader in the Communist Party who had engineered their takeover of the nationalist cause. When, in April 1987 there was Serbian unrest in Kosovar city of Polje, Milosevic was sent there by the Serbian President Stambolic. As the Kosovo Serbs demonstrated violently against the supposed Kosovar aggression, Milosevic addressed them with the sentence: “No one should dare to beat you.” The crowd’s mood changed as they began chanting “Slobo, Slobo.” This made Milosevic the protector of Serbs everywhere and provided him with the support he needed to assume political leadership of Serbia. Initially, he sought to maintain Yugoslavia under his leadership. To do so, he first assumed leadership of the communist party then sought to reunite the Serbian province of Vojvodina to Serbia. After doing so, he was able to portray himself as the protector of Yugoslavia against the forces in Slovenia and Croatia that sought to destroy the

³⁷⁹ Many people have reported that Milosevic himself does not appear to be a Serbian nationalist. Misha Glenny, who interviewed Milosevic in 1991, described the meeting: “When I introduced myself [to Milosevic] in Serbo-Croat, he drew back a little surprised, ‘Oh, you speak Serbian?’ Instead of commending me on learning this as most Serbs do, he asked: ‘Why did you learn Serbian?’ I explained to him that I had done some post-graduate study in Prague where I learned Czech and since acquainting myself with Yugoslavia, I had taught myself Serbo-Croat as an adjunct to my understanding of the country. A Serb nationalist would have immediately warmed to a Serbian speaker – an autocrat like Milosevic, however felt uncomfortable with it. The interview was conducted in English.” See (Glenny 1996) 126-127.

nation by declaring their independence. By so doing, he was able to win the support of the JNA. This would later allow him to take over absolute control of the JNA so that they became, in effect, the Serbian Army.

The collective presidency of Yugoslavia failed after Milosevic became President of Serbia. On May 15, 1991, the Croatian president, Stipe Mesic should have become Yugoslavia's president as a result of the normal rotation among the eight member collective presidency. His election was blocked through Milosevic's influence. The country was thus left without a president. As this crisis continued to simmer, Slovenia and Croatia headed toward independence. In a referendum in December 1990, Slovenians overwhelmingly voted for independence. In May 1991, over 90% of Croats also voted for independence. The collective presidency met several times to attempt to resolve the situation to no avail. All sides merely asserted their own positions in these meetings. Milosevic's position is summed up by Silber:

Unity is the holy grail of modern Serb nationalism; all Serbs in a single state. Milosevic did not dispute the right of the Croats or the Slovenes to secede. But he insisted that the Serbs of Croatia had the same right to secede, in turn, from Croatia, and that the break-up of Yugoslavia would necessitate a redrawing of the borders. The internal borders of Yugoslavia had been drawn in 1945.³⁸⁰

The two crises together put Yugoslavia in a very dangerous situation. As the JNA, the only pan-Yugoslavian group committed to maintaining the country, was commanded by the collective President, the fact that there was no President meant that there was no commander-in-chief of the Yugoslavian army. There was no one, therefore, who could command the military to intervene in the case of a republic declaring independence. At the same time, Slovenia and Croatia were rapidly preparing to declare their independence.

As the situation reached its climax, James Baker, the United States Secretary of State arrived in Belgrade.

The Gulf War, in the words of the then-President George Bush, had established the United States as the "respected and undisputed leader of the

³⁸⁰ (Little 1996) 147

free world.” All sides in Yugoslavia’s conflict set great store on Baker’s visit; all sides wanted to see him.³⁸¹

Unfortunately, all sides were disappointed. Baker seems to have been ill prepared for the situation in Yugoslavia. The United States’ policy was that the unity and integrity of Yugoslavia must be maintained. Baker met with the leaders of all 8 republics, but seemed to feel that if Mesic could take office as the President of Yugoslavia, the situation would be defused. Momir Bulatovic, the President of the Republic of Montenegro, described his meeting:

When I first met Mr. Baker I said “Tell me what you want from me.” He was confused about how to start the conversation with me, until they brought him his briefing book. I looked into it to see what it said about Montenegro. I peeked into it and there were just two lines:
the smallest republic in Yugoslavia.
a possible fifth vote for Mesic.³⁸²

The meeting with the federal Prime Minister, Ante Markovic seems even more remarkable, as Silber describes it:

According to the former Defence Minister, Admiral Branko Mamula, who was Veljko Kadijevic’s most trusted advisor throughout the crisis that led to war, Baker told Markovic to “wrap the Slovenes gently on the knuckles.” Markovic has been silent about his role in the run-up to Slovenia’s ten-day war; neither man has confirmed that the phrase was used.³⁸³

Baker’s visit resulted in nothing and the United States stayed out of Yugoslavia for a considerable time after this occurred. Baker would later say concerning Yugoslavia: “We don’t have a dog in this fight.”

Croatia, differently from Slovenia, went down a more sinister road toward independence. In 1971, Tito crushed the Maspok, a nationalist movement in Croatia which was led by members of the Communist party and sought to create an independent Croatia. The leaders were imprisoned or went into exile, only to return twenty years later to Croatia to lead it on the way to independence in the Croatian

³⁸¹ (Little 1996) 150.

³⁸² (Little 1996) 151

³⁸³ (Little 1996) 151

Democratic Union (HDZ). This political party, which was legalised in December 1989, was led by Franjo Tudjman, a historian and formerly a General in the Yugoslavian People's Army (JNA). They argued that the Serbs had far too much influence in Yugoslavia, so that the only option for Croatia to maintain itself was for the republic to declare their independence. Thus, the more Milosevic fed Serbian nationalism, the greater the calls in Croatia became for independence. Ivica Racan, the Communist chief in Croatia, stated:

Milosevic's aggressive policy was the strongest propaganda for Tudjman. Milosevic was sending his gangs to Croatia, where they were dancing and singing: 'This is Serbia' which provoked and liberated the national pride and the nationalist reaction of Croats which was effectively used by Tudjman.³⁸⁴

Tudjman invited the expatriate Croats to the HDZ Congress in February 1990, securing financing for the upcoming campaign and demonstrating the party's political direction. Many of the expatriates had been forced out of the country after Tito clamped down on the Maspok; others were Ustase who fled Yugoslavia after World War Two. The HDZ beat Racan's renamed Communist Party, the Party of Democratic Change, in elections in 1990. This, understandably, made the Serbs nervous and pushed them toward Milosevic. When Tudjman was later quoted as saying: "Thank God my wife is not a Jew or a Serb," the Serbian fears were strengthened.

The situation in Croatia was exacerbated by a significant population of Serbs in Knin and in other, rural areas. In fact, some of the more rural villages around Knin had populations that were almost 100% Serbian. These rural, mostly uneducated Serbs, responded to Tudjman's resurgent nationalism in fear, which was played on by Serb nationalists in Croatia in the *Srbska Demokratska Stranka* (the Serbian Democratic Party in Croatia). The SDS was originally led by Jovan Raskovic, a moderate, who spoke at a rally of 10,000 people in a small town south of Zagreb. Belgrade radio reported:

³⁸⁴ Quoted in: (Little 1996) 84

Addressing the crowd, Jovan Raskovic... said that the Serbs respect the Croatian people's rights to their sovereign state, but they [the Serbs] demand in that state an equal position for the Serbian and other peoples. The Serbs do not want a second state in Croatia, but they demand autonomy... the Serbian people in Croatia should be allowed to speak their language, to write their script, to have their schools [cheers], to have their education programs, their publishing houses and their newspapers.³⁸⁵

In the nationalistic climate following the rise to power of Milosevic and Tudjman, Raskovic was soon forced out of the leadership of the SDS and replaced by a much more rabid Serb nationalist, Milan Babic. Babic sought an independent Serbian state in the area controlled by Croatia. He enlisted the support of those areas of Croatia where Serbs were in the majority and were sympathetic to him. Those areas where Serbs were in the majority but that did not support him were cajoled and threatened into supporting Babic and the SDS. Where that was not successful, force was used. Once the current crisis was resolved, Babic and Croatian Serbs caused another catastrophe, far worse than the situation in Slovenia.

Slovenia, economically the strongest and most western of the republics, declared its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991 under the leadership of Milan Kucan. After an almost unanimous vote of the Slovenian Parliament on 25 June 1991, the Slovenians took control of the borders, air traffic and ports. Kucan had an agreement with Tudjman in Croatia that they would declare independence at the same time so that, together, they could fight the JNA by pooling their information and military resources. Although Tudjman declared independence at the same time as Slovenia, the Croats reneged on the other parts of this agreement, so Slovenia was left to fight the JNA alone. The JNA attempted to retake control of the borders on the 26th of June. There was a brief conflict, which became known as the Ten Day War. This was the beginning of the end of Yugoslavia.

The United States argued that this was a problem for the Europeans, one that they had to deal with. The Europeans, after the negotiations were successfully concluded that would turn the European Community into the European Union, were happy to meet the American demands. At a meeting of the European Community foreign ministers on 23 June, they agreed not to recognize any unilateral declarations

³⁸⁵ Quoted in: (Little 1996) 95

of independence. As the then British Prime Minister John Major put it: “The first prize is to hold the federation together in Yugoslavia.”³⁸⁶ The troika of the European Community— consisting of the foreign ministers of the last, current and next president of the EC; at this time, Jacques Poos of Luxembourg, Hans van den Broek of the Netherlands and Gianni de Michelis of Italy – went to Belgrade to negotiate a cease-fire. Jacques Poos was head of this delegation, as Luxembourg had the EC presidency until the 1st of July, at which point Van den Broek took over as the Dutch took over the EC presidency. Silber and Little describe their visit:

They came – in the phrase of many a subsequent mediator – to “bang heads together,” as though the conflict was caused by no more than some ill-defined, but frequently alluded to Balkan temperament, a south Slavic predisposition – either cultural or genetic – toward fratricide. They behaved as though all they had to do was to persuade the belligerents of the folly of war. They failed to recognize that, in some circumstances, the resort to war is far from irrational. It was, for President Kucan’s Government on that fateful night, a profoundly rational, and indeed the only, way to achieve what they wanted.³⁸⁷

The troika arrived in Belgrade in the late evening, met with the Croat and Slovene leaders and asked that they revoke their declarations of independence. The Slovenes, who felt they were doing well in the war, refused to do so. After negotiating throughout the night, the troika left believing that they had arranged a three-point cease-fire. The Slovenes and Croats would put their independence on hold for three months; the JNA would return to their barracks and Mesic would take his turn as head of State. However, the Slovenes, who felt they were doing well in the war, claimed that they had not agree to this cease-fire, which in any event failed to address the central problem of who would control the borders, air-traffic and ports. The fighting continued.

It was at this point that public opinion began to turn in favour of the Slovenes, who were portrayed as a westward-leaning country standing up to an evil communist monolith. Markovic, the prime minister, withdrew his support from the JNA, making it appear that the JNA was acting on its own authority without any

³⁸⁶ Quoted in: (Little 1996), 159.

³⁸⁷ (Little 1996) 159.

government mandate. When a member of the JNA's general staff demanded Slovenia cease hostilities or face 'decisive military action,' it only confirmed the impression that the military was out of control. By June 30th, Serbia withdrew its support for the JNA's attempt to hold the country together. When General Kadijevic stated that there were only two options left: full scale military intervention in Slovenia or withdrawal of the JNA and recognition of Slovene independence, Milosevic's representative, Borisav Jovic stated that military intervention was not an option:

I remember well that day because it was a day when I first announced our new policy. It was very clear to me that Slovenia had seceded, and that it would be useless to wage war there. The only thing I thought which we should do was to defend the Serb populated territories in Croatia because they wanted to stay in Yugoslavia. Concerning Slovenia, I said that we could not use a war option in Slovenia.³⁸⁸

Thus Milosevic, who had always been more interested in a Greater Serbia than in a united Yugoslavia, focused his attention on the Serbs in Croatia. In order to do this, the JNA had to be reigned in. Milosevic therefore told Jovic to stop blocking the election of Mesic. When the EC troika returned to Yugoslavia on the 30th, Jovic made it appear that Serbia, with great reluctance, was giving in to the European pressure to have Mesic elected. Silber and Little describe this meeting:

Late into the evening, the troika sat with Milosevic in the Federal Presidency, painstakingly trying to extract from him a "concession" he had already decided to make. Meanwhile the Federal Presidency members were assembling in the same building, a few doors down the corridor, and preparing, finally, to elect Mesic as President. Mesic himself had come to Belgrade on the understanding that his election would now go ahead. Finally, close to midnight, the Federal Presidency met formally, in the presence of the three EC foreign ministers. Jovic made great show of opposing the election of Mesic... He asked for a formal guarantee that Europe would respect the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia, and demanded that the troika press Mesic, as President, to work to restore the constitutional order, including the return of Slovene border-crossings to the Yugoslav federal authorities. His position could not have been more disingenuous. Only hours earlier he had announced, in the closed session of the Defense of the Constitution, that Serbia was now in favor of Slovene secession. Every Yugoslav in the room knew it. Only the hapless troika seemed oblivious to what was going on.

³⁸⁸ (Little 1996), 161.

When midnight struck, the Presidency of the European Community changed hands. A domineering Van den Broek forced an obviously reluctant Milosevic to clink glasses with him. Jacques Poos handed over to Hans Van den Broek. "You see," said Van den Broek, "this is how democracy works. I will chair the meeting now because I have taken over. Similarly, you should elect Mesic." In return, he promised: "... and I will make a public statement saying that Europe supports the unity of Yugoslavia." With a great demonstration of reluctance, the Serb members agreed [to elect Mesic]. In the small hours of July 1, Mesic was finally elected head of country which, in the eyes of those who elected him, no longer existed. A comprehensively out-manuevered, but determinedly optimistic EC troika declared that further progress had been made.³⁸⁹

Thus, Milosevic was able to make it appear that he was giving in to the European's demands, when in fact he was using them to further his own goals in Croatia.

The JNA, however, had not given up on preventing Slovenian independence. On the 2nd of July, an armoured unit attempted to move up from its camp near the Slovenian border with Croatia. The Serbian forces attacked it, causing the JNA to attempt to reinforce it with another armoured column from Croatia. This column was also attacked as it tried to cross the border into Slovenia. The JNA then ordered air strikes against the Serbian forces, who were forced to flee. General Blagoje Adzic, the JNA's chief of staff, spoke to the nation on television, criticizing the federal government for allowing Yugoslavia to disintegrate and stating that the JNA would wage war until it had regained control of the country. He also stated: "We will make sure that the war that has been forced upon us is as short as possible."³⁹⁰ At this point, a convoy of 180 armoured vehicles left Belgrade en route to Slovenia.

According to Little and Silber:

The convoy never reached Slovenia, nor was it ever intended to. Its real mission was to take up positions near the Croatian border with Serbia for the coming war against the Croats.³⁹¹

The German foreign minister, Hans Dietrich Genscher, was on his way to visit the Slovenian capital when these events occurred. His train had to stop, and then turn around as a result of the fighting. Genscher, along with most other European and

³⁸⁹ (Little 1996), 162.

³⁹⁰ (Little 1996), 163.

³⁹¹ (Little 1996), 163.

American politicians, felt that JNA was running wild and had to be stopped. Kucan, the Slovenian president, played into these fears by speaking of an imminent invasion by the JNA. The JNA was humiliated.

On the 4th of July, the Federal Presidency of Yugoslavia reasserted its control over the JNA and negotiated a cease-fire. Slovenia was told to return all border crossings to the JNA and return their own military units to barracks. The Slovenes, sensing that public opinion was firmly on their side and knowing that Milosevic would oppose further intervention, did neither. Instead, they reinforced their units and strengthened their defenses. On the same day, the SPS recognized Slovenia's right to peaceful secession, but crucially, as later events would show, not Zagreb's.

The Slovene secession was formally recognized on the 8th of July at a summit meeting on the island of Brioni. The EC troika met with the leaders of Slovenia and Yugoslavia (including Serbia). After some heated negotiations, it was agreed that the Slovenian police would control the borders, but the profits from this would go to the Yugoslav federal reserves; the JNA would return to barracks within Slovenia and the Slovenian forces would be deactivated and return to base. Although the declaration of independence was still valid, they agreed to a three-month cooling off period before implementation. The lone voice still arguing for the unity of Yugoslavia was Ante Markovic, the last Prime Minister of the Yugoslav Federation:

Van den Broek convened a session of all the delegates at eight p.m. HE presented the four-point proposal, saying: "This is what the EC backs. Take it or leave it." Only Ante Markovic, who saw clearly that the proposal spelt the end of Yugoslavia and the death of his own efforts to hold it together, objected. Van den Broek, exasperated, called a break. He brought Markovic and Kucan together. Markovic spelt out his objections to the plan, Van den Broek asked Kucan whether Markovic's ideas were acceptable to the Slovenes. Kucan said they were not. "Very well," said Van den Broek, "we will go back to the original proposal." When Markovic again objected, Van den Broek stormed out of the room muttering, in English, according to Kucan: "What a people! What a country!"³⁹²

³⁹² (Little 1996), 164.

Although this four-point agreement was signed by all parties, none of its provisions was actually carried out and Slovenia was able to maintain their independence from Yugoslavia and the JNA.

During these negotiations, the Slovenian and Serbian representatives on the federal council met and agreed that the JNA would be withdrawn from Slovenia, granting Slovenia absolute independence from Yugoslavia and freeing up the JNA forces stationed there for the coming war against Croatia. The Federal Presidency agreed to this on the 18th of July. The only member to vote against this “temporary” withdrawal of the JNA from Slovenia was Stipe Mesic, the Croatian representative. He knew what these military units were going to be used for. Croatia had declared its independence before they were prepared to face the consequences, so that they could secede at the same time as Slovenia. Their failure to keep their agreements with Slovenia forced them to attempt their secession alone, with disastrous results.

Analysis

This description of the events leading up to the 10-Day War between Slovenia and the Yugoslav Federation is very brief, but it is sufficient to help show how a hopefully realistic ethic of war can help guide ethical decision-making. One danger in this kind of analysis is the problem of history. We now know more about the events in the former Yugoslavia, so that it is easy to second-guess those for whom the coming tragedy was still unknown. It is, however, true that there were warning signs as early as 1987 when Milosevic first rose to prominence. These signs were ignored. At the same time, our knowledge of these events and their repercussions is far less clear than concerning the events leading up to World War Two. Our interpretation of these events cannot be as clear or logical as we could wish it to be. As discussed above, events seldom fit into a coherent, logical and easily discernable pattern; they rather tend to be far more fluid and incoherent, requiring we do a great deal of work in order to make any sense of them. Christian ethics thus has far more in common with poetry than with mathematics, in that we look as much at the seemingly unrelated elements of a situation and attempt to make some sense of them as a help to our own decision-making and actions.

One of the most striking points to be made about this brief description of the events leading up to the 10-Day War is how the nature of war has changed since World War Two. For Barth and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Niebuhr war was a matter of an unambiguous matter of nation against nation, usually prefaced by a declaration of war from one side against the other. This is demonstrated by the traditional just-war theory criterion that war must be declared by a legitimate authority. This criterion can be traced as far back as Augustine, who wrote:

The natural order which seeks the peace of humankind, ordains that the monarch should have the power of undertaking war if he thinks it advisable.³⁹³

Thus, it has been the case for a long time that war only be fought between recognized States, whose leader has the legitimate authority to declare war. Although their have always been civil wars, the majority of wars leading up to and including World War Two were fought between belligerent nations. In time since World War Two, the nature of war has changed so that, even in modern supporters of the just war theory, the criterion of legitimate authority is recognized as problematic at best.³⁹⁴ The reason this criterion is difficult to apply is that war is now seldom just a matter for sovereign States, but often involves various groupings within a political State. This is clearly a problem in the situation is Yugoslavia, where the problem of legitimate authority was never clarified. The authority ought to have rested with the president of Yugoslavia; Mesic, however, who should have been president at this time, was prevented from taking office leaving no legitimate authority to command the Yugoslav military. In such a situation, it is difficult for outside negotiators to know with whom they ought to negotiate with. It also demonstrates some of the difficulties, discussed above, with both Barth and Niebuhr's understanding of war. In World War Two, the two sides were quite clearly distinguishable – the Axis, led by Germany; and the Allies, which included the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, France, then

³⁹³ (Augustine), XXII. 75.

³⁹⁴ See, for example, (Coates 1997), esp. 123-145 and (Walzer 1977), esp. 53-54. Walzer argues that States have the right to defend themselves against aggression because aggression challenges rights that are worth dying for. These rights are "territorial integrity" and "political sovereignty" and are derived by the State from the natural rights of individuals. It is difficult to see how to apply this to civil wars, as in the case of the 10-Day War.

after the fall of France the Free French who were based in the United Kingdom, the United States and various other nations. For especially Barth, but also for Niebuhr, it was clear which side was morally right and which side wasn't. In the situation of Yugoslavia, it is not clear what the sides are let alone which side is morally right. This means any discussion of the ethics of war in the contemporary context cannot be quite so clear-cut as the discussions surrounding World War Two.

A further difference in war today compared to the past is that most wars, at least for Western Powers such as the United Kingdom and the United States, are wars of intervention not of self-defense. The threat to Britain posed by Nazi Germany was clear; the United States only actively entered World War Two after the Japanese attacked the US military at Pearl Harbor. Although the economic interests of these nations may be involved in areas like Kuwait, and possibly in Yugoslavia, the existence of the nation itself is not threatened. Barth made this a condition for God to command a nation to go to war, yet in the contemporary situation it is difficult to apply that to situations like Yugoslavia. This is a basic premise of the just-war theory, which must be significantly modified if it is to be used with reference to wars of intervention, or so-called humanitarian intervention.³⁹⁵ Michael Walzer, a contemporary proponent of the just war theory, argues that

Humanitarian intervention is justified when it is a response (with reasonable expectations of success) to acts that "shock the moral conscience of mankind..." Any state capable of stopping the slaughter has a right, at least, to try to do so.³⁹⁶

Walzer makes no attempt to try to argue this on the basis of the criteria of self-defense, which as discussed above, justifies a State's decision to go to war. It appears that we are left with a blanket justification of a nations leaders decision to use force to "stop the slaughter." This argument does not appear to offer any assistance to the leaders of the United States and the European Community with regard to Yugoslavia. God's judgment can be seen in the war on the population of the former Yugoslavia – the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. The war, to a large extent, came about as a result of what Niebuhr terms henotheism; the Serbs, Slovenians, and Croats were all primarily

³⁹⁵ See (Walzer 1977), 101-108.

³⁹⁶ (Walzer 1977), 107-108.

concerned with their own status and their own ability to control their political actions. As a result each group sought their own good at the cost of the others. The 10-Day War, therefore, can be interpreted as God's judgment against the henotheism of the various groups in Yugoslavia; in other words, against the type of idolatry that believes one's race is the center of value against which everything else is to be judged. The Serbs felt that they had to be oppressed, as they formed the majority of the population in Yugoslavia, in order to make for a strong, united country; the Croats felt they were oppressed by the Serbian majority of the population of Yugoslavia; the Slovenes, who see themselves more as a part of western Europe than eastern, felt that they had been forced into a confederation with backward, eastern races. Each group's expression of distrust and hatred of the other group strengthened that other group's fear and loathing of the first, which, in turn, strengthened their fears. This dynamic of hatred goes back to the beginning of the country, when it was known as *The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes*. It was forcefully suppressed by Tito during the post-World War Two period and, after Tito's death in 1980, was used by various leaders, such as Milosevic and Tudjman, to bolster their own political power within the country. This created a vicious circle of hatred, where Milosevic's calls for a Greater Serbia created an atmosphere of animosity between ethnic Croats and Serbs living in Croatia, which Tudjman used by inflaming the Croats against the Serbs, which then was used in turn by Milosevic. The war that resulted from this can be interpreted as God's judgment against such idolatry, and the suffering of the many relatively innocent people of all ethnic groups in this tragedy is God's call to all of us to repentant of such henotheism.

As Niebuhr discussed in his article "The Grace of Doing Nothing," God's action in history is a call for each nation to engage in self-analysis. The western powers, especially the United States and the European powers, are also guilty of the sin of henotheism. This results in a destruction of God's good commonwealth and leads different types of conflict – some "hot" and some "cold." In the aftermath of the Cold War, this attitude became readily apparent. President George Bush's argument that the United States had won the Cold War, thereby saving the world from the evils of a socialist dictatorship clearly demonstrated this attitude, as does the American understanding of the situation in Yugoslavia as a European affair that

needs to be solved by Europeans. Jim Baker's statement that "we don't have a dog in this fight" is a crude demonstration of the same attitude. The henotheistic propaganda of the Cold War era, together with western economic policy to Yugoslavia, helped create the situation that led to the tragedy of Yugoslavia.

The Cold War economic policy of the West, especially the United States, toward Yugoslavia created an artificially high standard of living within Yugoslavia. When the Eastern Block collapsed and the Cold War ended, the West no longer felt they needed to support Yugoslavia and withdrew most of their economic aid. This, in turn, increased the tensions amongst the ethnic groups dramatically and hastened the coming catastrophe in the nation. Had the West not used economic means to garner Yugoslav support during the Cold War, or not have withdrawn that support so quickly with the end of that conflict, the tragedy may have been averted or, at least, somewhat softened. Throughout the period leading up to the war, the leaders who sought to negotiate some sort of peaceful settlement seemed inadequately prepared for the task. The American Secretary of State, James Baker, was unaware of the nature of the situation, ignorant of who he was talking to and of the role of each of the republics within the Yugoslav Federation. He, along with the other western leaders, seemed to be looking for a quick fix to this situation and believed that the solution lay forcing the republic, most importantly Serbia, to allow Mesic to start his term as president of the Yugoslav Federation. In so doing, Baker and the others failed to pay attention to the statements of Milosevic, Tudjman and Kucan and to the events occurring within Yugoslavia and fuelled the fear that the United States, together with Germany, wanted to gain a warm water port by breaking up Yugoslavia and then gaining control, or at least influence, with an independent Slovenia.³⁹⁷ This made Serbian resentment to the Slovenes greater, and reinforced the JNA's view that Yugoslavian unity must be maintained against the threat from the west. The carelessness of the west in attempting to diffuse this situation was counter-productive and irresponsible, as no one appeared to realise the complexity of the situation. War is a tragedy, but the Yugoslavian Republics – especially Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia, were convinced that it was the only way to get what they wanted. The failure of western leaders to realise this and give the situation the care it

³⁹⁷ See (Little 1996), 113.

required only served to make the situation worse. As Barth rightly pointed out, all nations share in the responsibility of creating a peace in which one nation, or ethnic group, feels that the only way to obtain what it has been deprived of in peacetime is by going to war. It is therefore highly ironic, given that the west was at least partially responsible for the situation in Yugoslavia, that James Baker can say: “We don’t have a dog in that fight.”

Again, the suffering of the relatively innocent in the Yugoslavian conflict is a call for repentance to the West. In attempting to further our own ends, we have created violent situations. We sell weapons to countries and republics, yet claim to be innocent when those weapons are used. When we no longer have any interests – and our interests are normally economic – we pull out of the area and leave whoever is left to fend for themselves. This is sinful, as we exacerbate situations for our own interests and are at least partially responsible for the suffering that comes as a result of our action or inaction. It is also sinful because it is irresponsible – our area of concern is too narrow, we are as guilty as those in Yugoslavia of henotheism. We appear to be willing to allow others to suffer as long as we “don’t have a dog in that fight.” Repentance requires a change in attitude, and this is an area where the Western powers clearly need to change their attitude and practise.

Judgment is clearly one way of interpreting the events of war and helping prevent future situations that may develop into war, but it is not of assistance in determining what course of action to take in the current situation. It is here that using the symbols of God the Creator and Sustainer provides some assistance. Part of both of these symbols is the presumption *against* war. War may come about, but it ought to be in spite of our best efforts rather than because of them. Our efforts therefore ought to be to support those elements in a situation that are striving to solve that conflict peacefully. In the situation leading up to the 10-Days War, there were not many people who were working towards peace but there were a few. One of these was Ante Markovic who, as Prime Minister of the Federation of Yugoslavia, brought in market reforms and improved the economic situation in Yugoslavia greatly. His concerns about the Brioni agreement were ignored by the EC troika. He attempted to warn the parties to the negotiation that this agreement would not prevent war, merely change the battlefield from Slovenia to Croatia. As he foresaw, this agreement, and

the secret agreement between Serbia and Slovenia to withdraw all of the JNA units from Slovenia, brought the coming war between Serbia and Croatia moved a large step closer. Had we listened to his analysis of the situation and the effect the Brioni Agreement would have, we might have attempted to work out a better agreement that could have prevented the coming conflict. Instead, the troika was blind to the nature of the situation and Serbia's intentions; they were then completely manipulated by Milosevic.

What could the negotiators have done differently throughout this crisis? In reading the accounts of these negotiations, one is struck by both the arrogance and ignorance of the Western politicians involved in the negotiations. They acted as if they *knew* what the problem was and the best way to solve it. They acted patronizingly to all of the natives, as it were, and failed to grasp the nature of the crisis. As discussed above, one crucial element of hopefully realistic ethics is the importance of getting as clear an understanding as possible of any situation. That means that those involved in a crisis can never assume that they know the answers, especially when they come from outside of a situation and attempt to help settle it peacefully. The EC troika and the American Secretary of State needed to firstly listen to those involved and then, in discussion with them, seek to solve the problems in the country peacefully by working with those involved, not by dictating terms. They also needed to recognise those forces within Yugoslavia who were truly working for a peaceful solution to the problems facing the country and those who sought their own gain from the situation. Milosevic had, as early as 1988 made clear his goal for a Serb-dominated Yugoslavia. He worked toward this goal by firstly reuniting the Serb province of Vojvodina, which had been separated from Serbia in the 1964 constitution, with Serbia. He succeeded in doing so as a result of the so-called "Yoghurt Revolution" in 1988. This should have at least caused western politicians to be suspicious. His further actions within the government, including the situation regarding the presidency of Mesic, also demonstrated his desire for a Yugoslavia dominated by a Greater Serbian State. This desire was reinforced by the Serbian's belief that Croatia was the cradle of their civilisation. Historically, the Serbs clearly felt they had a greater claim on Croatia than on Slovenia. The west seemed to ignore Milosevic's statements, policy decisions and military activity throughout the period

leading up to the 10-Day War. One failure of the west was to adequately study the situation before seeking to act for peace. They needed to at least attempt to gain an understanding of the nature of the political situation and the players within that situation, they also needed to look at the history of the region and the hatreds between the various populations, then, and only then, should they have sought to negotiate any kind of agreement in Yugoslavia.

That analysis should have included looking at the people involved in the negotiations and identifying those who are truly interested in working toward peace. Unfortunately, in Yugoslavia, such people were rare. As mentioned above, one such person was Ante Markovic. The conflict would have probably been hindered had we supported his reforms more when he was in office, rather than pulling out almost all of our economic aid to the region and leaving him alone to attempt to reform the Yugoslav economy and society. We certainly should have shown more understanding regarding his rejection of the Brioni Agreement. Another force that was constantly misunderstood by the West was the Yugoslav People's Army. They certainly were not a benign force for the good, but they were also not the demon portrayed in the press. In fact, they were the one force that truly acted to maintain the unity of Yugoslavia. Although it is true they sought to do so by force, it may be that they had no choice given the nature of the political situation. It may have been possible to attempt to assist the JVA in helping preserve the peace. It may also not have been possible, but the portrayal of the JVA as war mongering demons was counter-productive to any attempt to bring about a peaceful settlement of the conflict.

It would also have been helpful had the Western leaders not simply assumed that no one wanted war. There are times, and this was in all probability one of them, where the leaders of a nation feel that the only way to acquire what they want is by going to war. In such a case, war is the logical solution to the problems the leadership of a nation perceives in their relations with their neighbours. Negotiating with people who are not opposed to war or even want to go to war, is far different from negotiating with persons who want peace. It must be more than just "banging heads together." The negotiators, in order to reach a peaceful solution, must either force the sides to compromise or offer enough support to one side in the dispute that the other is not willing to go to war for fear of the results. In either event, it is

difficult to see how the negotiations can be successful without the use or the threat of using military forces, such as NATO or other military units. Since both sides desired a military solution, it appears that the only way of resolving the conflict involved the EC agreeing to police the area with enough military strength to prevent either side from going to war. However, this option was rejected from the very beginning by the West as being impossible to carry out. It is therefore difficult to see how a war between Serb-led Yugoslavia and Slovenia could have been prevented, without leading to a war in Croatia.

Given the confused nature of the situation leading up to the 10-Day War, determining the best, or moral, course of action is extremely difficult. Looking back, it appears clear that there was no intervention that did not involve a significant military operation could have prevented the 10-Day War and the following wars. In the tangled web of that situation, there were no clear answers about what the right thing was for the Western Powers to do. A hopeful realistic ethic that attempts to view the people and events leading up to that conflict provides some assistance in moral decision making about the best response to that situation, but it – and no ethics can, as both Barth and Niebuhr argue – can not give us the one moral option. It helps us to understand what is happening, and in so doing, helps us to decide what we ought to do. It does this without becoming anthropocentric in its ethics, as any good we could do in that situation is only good in response to God's prior action. At the same time, it recognises our significant (but limited) creative ability to act. It shares more with poetry, in that it looks at the interrelatedness of people and events and attempts to understand what is happening by applying the symbols of the Christian tradition to those events in order to see what God is doing. We then, using our God-given ability, respond to God's action in a fitting way. This all is done under God's grace, with the recognition that how we interpret the events and respond to what we perceive to be God's action in them may be wrong. Hopeful realism is hopeful because it trusts not in our human ability but in the good and gracious God who chooses to be in relation with God's good creation.

Declaration

I, David Edward Roberts, hereby declare that I have written this thesis and that the work done here is entirely my own.

David Edward Roberts

11. July 2000

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