

NOT LIBERATION BUT JUSTICE

An Analysis of Reinhold Niebuhr's
Understanding of Human Destiny
in the Light of the
Doctrine of the Atonement.

by Stephen Mark de Gruchy



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This thesis is dedicated to
my parents, John and Isobel,
my wife, Marian
and my daughter, Thea.

The ultimate form of sin is a corruption
of man's quest for redemption.
(Reinhold Niebuhr in *Faith and History*, p.205).



The financial assistance of the Centre for Science Development towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed in this thesis and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the Centre for Science Development.

I hereby declare that the following thesis: "Not Liberation but Justice: An Analysis of Reinhold Niebuhr's Understanding of Human Destiny in the Light of the Doctrine of the Atonement" is my own work, and that all the sources I have quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.


S.M. de Gruchy

ABSTRACT

This thesis takes a new approach to the interpretation of Reinhold Niebuhr's thought by arguing that the category of "redemption" is a key hermeneutical concept for understanding his theology. It is argued that his ethics can best be interpreted as flowing out his understanding of human destiny in the light of the Christian doctrine of the Atonement.

The thesis argues that the worldviews that Niebuhr was constantly debating with and criticizing are inadequate from the perspective of human destiny, i.e. the relationship between redemption and history. These worldviews, including Marxism, Liberalism, Protestant Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism and Established Communism, fail to understand the "facts of history", and so conceive of human destiny as the search for "liberation." In a new typology which helps understand Niebuhr's thought, they are categorized as three false soteriologies: the *denial* of history, the *worship* of history, and the *completing* of history.

The thesis then lays out Niebuhr's understanding of the "facts of history" against which a coherent understanding of human destiny needs to be established. These are that the self is a unity of body and spirit; that history is a compound of freedom and necessity; and that the historical self is the sinful self.

Niebuhr believed that his reworking of the doctrine of the Atonement dealt with these "facts", and provided the best grounding for human destiny. We argue that Niebuhr held to an objective theory of the Atonement framed by the questions and concerns of the subjective theory. We examine his doctrine in greater depth through a discussion on the Cross of Christ as "wisdom and truth", and "power and grace."

Niebuhr argued that the ethical challenge of the Cross is love, and the relationship of redemption to history, arising out of the doctrine of the Atonement, is conceived of as the practice of justice. The relationship of love to justice is analyzed. The thesis affirms Niebuhr's basic contention that not liberation but justice best articulates the relationship of redemption to history in the light of the Cross of Christ. In the evaluation and critique, it is argued that the strength of Niebuhr's understanding of human destiny is that it provides a safeguard against both the divinization and demonization of politics.

However, three significant weaknesses are identified in Niebuhr's understanding of justice. These have to do with hope, solidarity and reconciliation. It is argued that the doctrine of the Atonement can integrate these three facets of justice by relating the Cross of Christ to the full story of Easter, the full story of the Gospels, and the full story of the New Testament respectively. This discussion is the basis for the development of a politically responsible soteriology.

Included at the end, in the form of an excursus that is not part of the argument of the thesis, is a case study on Niebuhr's (brief) writings on South Africa. This is a new addition to Niebuhr studies.

PREFACE

In my last year at high school, Peter Moll and Richard Steele were incarcerated as the first conscientious objectors to military service in the South African Defence Force. Knowing both of them, and knowing their commitment to the Christian faith, I spent many hours struggling with what this meant for me. I was privileged to grow in this struggle with family, church community, and friends.

This pattern of faith-induced struggle and community support has not diminished in the ensuing twelve years. Indeed this thesis is a momentary "resting-place" in the search for a faith that would nourish and empower in the face of South African reality. There are many events and many people who have shaped that reality and that search, and I thank all who have been part of my journey over those years, especially my parents John and Isobel de Gruchy, my wife Marian, Douglas Bax, the people of Rondebosch and Gleemoor Congregational Churches, and members of SUCA (Student Union for Christian Action) in the years 1982-5.

A big thank you to teachers, colleagues and friends with whom I've been privileged to study at the University of Cape Town, Union Theological Seminary in New York, and the University of the Western Cape and who have shared part of the journey and contributed to what clarity of thought I have, especially Martin Forrest, Paul Germond, Robin Petersen, Des van der Water, Wilma Jakobsen, Scott Matheney, and Charles Villa-Vicencio. The stimulation and

resourcefulness of my Doctoral supervisor, Professor Dirkie Smit, has been a great inspiration.

Dick Manzelmann, a good friend, one-time student of Niebuhr's, and recently retired from the Presbyterian ministry in New York State was a tremendous help in finding and mailing books and articles, and encouraging my study. My sister, Jeanelle, graciously interrupted a visit to New York City to visit the Union Seminary library and dig out valuable articles. A particular thanks to Professors Larry Rasmussen, Roger Shinn and John Bennett with whom I corresponded about aspects of Niebuhr's thought.

As with the struggle with conscientious objection, the search for faith and meaning represented by this thesis has thankfully always involved community support, (even from people who have no idea of what the thesis is all about!) My wife Marian has been a constant source of encouragement, proof-read the thesis, and took on a host of extra duties to support my efforts; and the birth of Thea in the final months of writing was a reminder both that life is more important than theology, and that theology must always be in service to life.

My parents have once again been very supportive, as have a number of friends, especially the members of our fortnightly "support group", Wilma and John, Don and Suellen, and Andre and Karen. To them, to the people of Gleemoor Congregational Church, and to all others who have shared in the process of this thesis I owe much thanks.

CONTENTS

<u>PREFACE</u>	i
<u>CONTENTS</u>	iii
<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	1
<u>CHAPTER ONE: HUMAN DESTINY AND SOTERIOLOGY</u>	8
1.1. A Short Biographical Overview.	8
1.2. Theologian of the Three Publics.	11
1.3. The Preacher's Message: Human Responsibility.	21
1.4. Human Destiny, Salvation and Ethics.	24
1.5. The Centrality of Soteriology.	29
1.6. Niebuhr's Theological Method: Experience, Polemics and Faith.	43
1.7. The Terms of the Debate: Liberation and Justice.	58
<u>CHAPTER TWO: REDEMPTION AS LIBERATION: THE FALSE SOTERIOLOGIES</u>	61
<u>2.1. The Three Types of False Redemption.</u>	61
<u>2.2. The Denial of History.</u>	68
2.2.1. Classical Greek Idealism.	68
2.2.2. Mysticism.	72
2.2.3. Naturalism, Romanticism and Fascism.	74
2.2.4. Protestant Orthodoxy.	79
2.2.5. The Denial of History: Concluding Remarks.	90
<u>2.3. The Worship of History.</u>	92
2.3.1. The Worldviews of the Renaissance.	93
2.3.2. Secular Liberalism.	98
2.3.3. Liberal Protestantism.	111
2.3.4. Marxism.	120
2.3.5. The Worship of History: Concluding Remarks.	133
<u>2.4. The Completing of History.</u>	136
2.4.1. Established Communism.	137
2.4.2. Messianic Sects.	146
2.4.3. Roman Catholicism.	150
2.4.4. The Completing of History: Concluding Remarks.	156

<u>CHAPTER THREE: ATONEMENT AND JUSTICE.</u>	159
<u>3.1. Human Nature and the "Facts of History".</u>	159
3.1.1. The Self as a Unity of Body and Spirit.	165
3.1.2. History as a Compound of Freedom and Necessity.	169
3.1.3. The Historical Self as the Sinful Self.	174
3.1.4. Liberation as a Denial of the Facts of History.	186
<u>3.2. True Redemption Through the Atonement of Christ.</u>	194
3.2.1. The Prophetic Identification of the Problem.	194
3.2.2. Salvation in Search of Doctrine.	201
3.2.3. The Cross as "Wisdom and Truth".	210
3.2.4. The Cross as "Grace and Power".	223
<u>3.3. Human Destiny as the Practice of Justice.</u>	240
3.3.1. The Challenge to Love.	241
3.3.2. The Practice of Justice.	249
3.3.3. The Weakness in Niebuhr's Understanding of Justice.	256
<u>CHAPTER FOUR: TOWARDS A POLITICALLY RESPONSIBLE SOTERIOLOGY</u>	263
4.1. Against the Demonization and Divinization of politics.	266
4.2. Atonement and Hope (or the Cross and the Full Story of Easter).	276
4.3. Atonement and Solidarity (or the Cross and the Full Story of the Gospels).	284
4.4. Atonement and Reconciliation (or the Cross and the Full Story of the New Testament).	295
4.5. Conclusion.	306
<u>EXCURSUS: NIEBUHR ON SOUTH AFRICA.</u>	310
1. Review of the Sources.	311
2. Commentary upon South African Events.	313
3. The "Tragedy" of Apartheid.	315
4. The Theology of Apartheid.	318
5. The South African Church Scene.	320
6. Pressure on South Africa.	322
7. Comparison between South Africa and the U.S.A.	324
<u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u>	327

INTRODUCTION.

This thesis deals with three themes: political ethics, the doctrine of the Atonement, and Reinhold Niebuhr, and this is the order in which they receive attention in my own theological reflections. In the first place I am persuaded that the search for a coherent and responsible political ethic is a priority for any theologian and pastor in South Africa at present. It is my conviction, secondly, that this ethic needs to be in dialogue with the heart of the Christian faith, salvation through the Cross of Christ (the Atonement). Thirdly, Reinhold Niebuhr provides a helpful and instructive case-study because he sought to relate political ethics to the doctrine of the Atonement.

While that is the order of priority in my own theological thinking, it is not the order in which I have undertaken to write this thesis. Here the order is reversed. The thesis therefore focuses on Reinhold Niebuhr, and in particular his use of the doctrine of the Atonement. The third theme emerges only slightly yet it remains my priority: the search for a coherent and responsible political ethic in South Africa.

To further understand the background for this thesis we turn briefly to explore each of these themes.

1. Reinhold Niebuhr.

The immediate focus of this thesis is upon the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr. I first became interested in his thought when I studied for a year at Union Theological Seminary in 1986/7. Fresh from Christian involvement and reflection in the political struggles of South Africa, I found his ideas in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* very exciting. However, I found his later praxis as described in the (then recently published) biography by Richard Fox,¹ and undergirded by his mature thought in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, reactionary and unhelpful. My STM thesis at Union Seminary reflects this feeling.² I argued that he was weak on the details and wrong on the central issue.

In the past six years I have continued to think about and wrestle with the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr. In that time I have discovered and re-discovered insights and perceptions in his thought that have illumined contemporary political ethics through Christian discourse, (even from the pulpit: perhaps the most difficult place of all to talk about "politics"!)). My earlier disdain has turned to respect, and I have learnt to appreciate the depth of his writings and reflections. I now think he is right on the central issue, but still weak on some crucial details.

¹ Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*. (New York: Pantheon, 1985).

² "A South African Interpretation and Critique of Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of the Atonement as it Informs his Political Ethics". It needs to be noted that my supervisor, Larry Rasmussen, Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics, while understanding the passion of my "youth", nevertheless took me to task for using the term "reactionary" about Niebuhr. His comments were most helpful in stimulating further reflection on Niebuhr as described below.

As indicated, Niebuhr provides a case-study for a broader question about political ethics, and the framing of my broader question certainly influences the way I "read" Niebuhr. But I am not apologetic for that. First, he of all people would appreciate that I can only interpret him out of my own "finite" perspective. And second, we read Niebuhr not so much to understand Niebuhr as to understand life, and the questions of life must always frame our reading.

Nevertheless, the thesis treats his thought with the integrity it deserves, and seeks to contribute to the ongoing dialogue with Niebuhr's theology and his interpreters. As part of that dialogue, I have maintained the generic use of male terms in direct quotes from Niebuhr and other scholars, while seeking to make my own language more inclusive.

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2. The Doctrine of the Atonement.

In our struggle for an adequate political ethic from a Christian point of view, the various Christian activist groups in which I participated tried many different options. There was never consensus. In those discussions, I was led more and more to ask the question as to the relationship of political ethics to salvation.

It seemed to me then, as it still does now, that unless our politics was integrated at a fundamental level with the central theme of our faith, the Cross of Christ, then it would always be the poorer cousin of "spirituality". The

apathy and conservatism of so many Christians made me seek to show that our involvement in politics in order to reject the injustice and oppression of the apartheid system stemmed from the centre and was not just an optional extra.

The journey therefore took me to reflect upon the relationship of the doctrine of the Atonement to political ethics. I was excited by Martin Luther's *Theologia Crucis*,³ and enjoyed Jürgen Moltmann's reworking of that tradition in *The Crucified God*.⁴ Nevertheless, I struggled with the relationship between the Cross and liberation.

While it is easy to say that on the cross Jesus sets us free or "liberates" us from sin, injustice, exploitation and oppression, I kept on wondering exactly how we were so liberated. There does not seem to me to be too much political liberation in the death of a single person on Golgotha, even if that person is the Son of God. To my mind the relationship between political ethics and the doctrine of the Atonement needed some deeper reflection.

This was the central issue on which I first believed Niebuhr wrong, and on which I now believe he was right. It is the substance of this thesis.

3. Political Ethics for South Africa.

Any attempt to seek a political ethics for South Africa is guaranteed to be full of speculations, subjective interpretations and uncertain predictions. Events are

³ See Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, ET. 1966). See especially pp.25ff.

⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*. (London: SCM, 1974).

moving so fast, that even a daily reading of the newspaper sometimes does not suffice to keep abreast of our "history in the making."

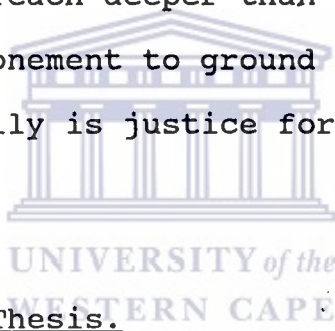
Nevertheless, it does seem to me that one of the issues that we have to deal with now is whether there is any helpful meaning to the word or concept "liberation". What does liberation mean in South Africa? What does it mean in any other country? Is a change in government liberation? Is a change in economic systems liberation? Is a change in education and health and housing policy liberation?

In a concrete sense there might be "liberation" from a foreign aggressor such as the "liberation" of Namibia from South Africa's military control, or "liberation" from an oppressive system, such as the collapse of apartheid's various land Acts. But after the aggressor or the system has been defeated, does the experience of liberation lead necessarily to a coherent and responsible political ethic? So the question is repeated: what does liberation mean? And further: is it the basis for a political ethics for Christians in South Africa?

Niebuhr would say no. He would definitely agree to liberation in the sense of defeating an aggressive foe (Hitler), and in the sense of overthrowing an oppressive system (prohibition of Trade Unions). But the notion that hopes of liberation alone can contribute to an adequate political ethic was severely criticized by him. He would argue that *not liberation but justice* should be the guiding idea of political ethics. The thesis sets out to explore this contention.

It seems to me that this is a significant point to make at the present in South Africa, as there is a constant clamouring about the New South Africa, and about continuing liberation struggles. Let there rather be a focus upon justice. Let justice rather than liberation guide our thoughts about health, housing, and education, about the law and the economy. This much we can learn from Reinhold Niebuhr.

Yet there is a need to go beyond Niebuhr. His vision of justice had some significant gaps that gave rise to his "ideological drift".⁵ Justice is a disputed term, and we therefore need to reach deeper than Niebuhr did into the doctrine of the Atonement to ground our political ethics in a justice that really is justice for the victims of our land.



4. Outline of the Thesis.

In the first chapter we examine Niebuhr's theological task and method, and establish the importance of soteriology and particularly the doctrine of the Atonement in his ethical thought.

In the second chapter we examine Niebuhr's polemical critique of a number of worldviews, arguing that in so far as they conceive of human destiny as "liberation" they are best understood as *false soteriologies*. The third chapter then focuses on Niebuhr's own understanding of human destiny through the Atonement of Christ as the practice of justice.

⁵ The phrase comes from Dennis McCann, *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981). See for example p.237.

The fourth chapter evaluates the relationship between the Atonement and justice. We argue that while Niebuhr's position is fundamentally correct, his understanding of justice could be better informed by the Atonement. We argue that we need to go beyond Niebuhr in reflecting upon the relationship of justice to hope, solidarity, and reconciliation in the light of the Atonement. These themes provide the contours for a politically responsible doctrine of the Atonement.

We have added at the end, in the form of an excursus, a case-study dealing with Niebuhr's reflections upon South Africa.



CHAPTER ONE: HUMAN DESTINY AND SOTERIOLOGY.

It is commonplace to begin to understand the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr from his analysis of *human nature*. That this has been done with good results is plain to see. We are convinced, however, that there is a great deal to be achieved by beginning with Niebuhr's analysis of *human destiny*. From this perspective *soteriology* rather than *anthropology* becomes the determinative hermeneutical key for interpreting his theology.

In this first chapter, "Human Destiny and Soteriology", we shall gain an overview of the theologian at work. After a brief biographical overview (1.1.), a discussion on the "publics" with whom he interacted (1.2.) leads to a consideration of the importance of responsibility in Niebuhr's ethic (1.3.). This in turn helps us discern the place of human destiny and soteriology in his theology and ethics (1.4.), and we argue the case for the importance of the doctrine of the Atonement (1.5). Clarity is reached on Niebuhr's theological method (1.6.), and on the terms "liberation" and "justice" (1.7.).

1.1. A Short Biographical Overview.

Karl Paul Reinhold was born in Wright City, Missouri in the United States of America, on June 21 1892, the third child to Gustav and Lydia Niebuhr. Gustav was a pastor of the German Evangelical Synod. The family moved to Lincoln, Illinois and Niebuhr completed his schooling and then

attended Eden Theological Seminary (of the German Evangelical Synod) near St. Louis.

Gustav Niebuhr died in 1913, the year that Reinhold graduated from seminary, and he was duly ordained and installed as pastor of his father's church. The mantle of the father was laid upon the son.¹ After a year in this church, Reinhold Niebuhr went to Yale's School of Religion and graduated in 1915 with a B.D. and M.A.

In August 1915 Niebuhr was inducted to the ministry of the Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit. He was to serve this church for 13 years until his departure for Union Theological Seminary in 1928. "The Detroit experience", writes Larry Rasmussen, "was theologically decisive":

On the anvil of harsh industrial reality in Detroit, the trauma of the First World War, and the onset of the worldwide Depression, Niebuhr tested the alternatives he would find wanting - religious and secular liberalism and Marxism - even when he remained a sobered and reformed liberal and a socialist... Detroit kindled the Christian indignation that would always fire Niebuhr, as well as the restless quest to theologically illumine the events of the day and thereby render them meaningful.²

Niebuhr made Union Seminary his home from 1928 until his retirement in 1960. During this period he preached in many different pulpits, taught generations of students, wrote a number of full-length books, edited various journals and contributed hundreds of articles to them and to other journals, and participated in numerous political

¹ The rite of installation concluded with the words: "We are about to lay the mantle of a father upon the son". See Richard Fox, *op. cit.*, p.20.

² Larry Rasmussen (Ed.), *Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life*. (London: Collins, 1988), p.7.

organizations.³ In the 1940's and 50's he was one of the most prominent intellectuals in the United States.⁴

Reinhold Niebuhr did not consider himself a theologian.⁵ By common consensus, however, he was not only a theologian, but one of the great Protestant theologians of the twentieth century. Perhaps Niebuhr was thinking of theology as a science of pure intellectual abstraction. But if Gustavo Gutierrez is correct in his assessment of the task of theology, then Niebuhr, who reflected upon history in the light of Scripture and the tradition of the church (Paul, Augustine, Luther, Kierkegaard, amongst others) clearly deserves the title *theologian*:

The function of theology as critical reflection on praxis has gradually become more clearly defined in recent years, but it has its roots in the first centuries of the Church's life. The Augustinian theology of history which we find in *The City of God*, for example is based on a true analysis of the signs of the times and the demands with which they challenge the Christian community.⁶

After the first of a number of strokes in 1952, Niebuhr's energy and output began to lag. He began to rely more and more upon the support of his wife, Ursula whom he

³ We shall examine these involvements in more detail below.

⁴ For example, *Time* magazine featured him on the cover of the 25th Anniversary edition, 1948. See Rasmussen (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.14.

⁵ "I cannot and do not claim to be a theologian". See the opening paragraph of "Intellectual Autobiography" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought*. (New York: Pilgrim Press, Second Edition, 1984), p.3. The first edition was edited by C.W. Kegley and R. W. Bretall (New York: MacMillan, 1956). Due to additions to the essays, the page numbering in the first and second editions is different.

⁶ *A Theology of Liberation*. (London: SCM, 1974), p.6. The irony of this similarity of purpose and the affirmation of Augustine should not be lost on anyone who has followed the debate between Niebuhr's "Christian Realism" and "Liberation Theology". See the debate between Thomas Sanders and Rubem Alves in *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol 33 No. 15, 1973, and the responses from John Bennett et al., Vol.33 No.17. See also Dennis McCann, *op. cit.*,

had married in 1932 and who was now the professor of religion at Barnard College in New York City.

The couple retired to Stockbridge Massachusetts and Reinhold Niebuhr died at home here on June 1, 1971 at the age of 78. At the funeral Rabbi Abraham Heschel summed up his life:

He appeared among us like a sublime figure out of the Hebrew Bible.... Niebuhr's life was a song in the form of deeds, a song that will go on for ever.⁷

1.2. Theologian of the Three Publics.

In his study of Christian theology and pluralistic culture David Tracy suggests that "each theologian addresses three distinct and related social realities: the wider society, the academy and the church".⁸ Tracy also calls these the three "publics" of theology. This is a helpful way of reflecting upon Niebuhr's self-understanding and life task.

A. *The Church.* Very clearly Niebuhr addressed the public of the church. This is undoubtedly the case in the period up until 1928 when he was a pastor. Yet speaking of his life as a whole McAfee Brown reminds us that "Niebuhr was active in the church to a degree often overlooked by both supporters and critics".⁹ We must recall that Niebuhr

⁷ Quoted in Fox, *op. cit.*, p.293.

⁸ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, (London: SCM, 1981), p.5. Interestingly in his footnote Tracy notes that this is a reflection upon some of Martin Marty's work including his essay: "Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience" in *The Journal of Religion* (1974) pp.332-360, reprinted in N.A. Scott, Jr. (Ed.), *The Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr*. (Chicago: University Press, 1975).

⁹ Robert McAfee Brown in the "Introduction" to *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p.xviii.

continued throughout his life to teach at a seminary whose primary task was to train ministers for the church.¹⁰

Also, Niebuhr continued to preach and to lead worship at Union Seminary as well as in many other university settings, and at various churches including the little church at Heath in Massachusetts where he had his summer holiday home before moving to Stockbridge. Indeed, Niebuhr is often best remembered as a preacher by those who knew him well.¹¹ John Bennett writes:

Niebuhr was one the most brilliant and persuasive preachers of this century, After his pastorate in Detroit, he spoke most naturally to academic congregations. His sermons in the Union Seminary chapel were important events.¹²

Many of Niebuhr's contributions to journals over the years were of course directed towards this public. He wrote for *Christianity and Society*, and edited *Christianity and Crisis*. He was in constant dialogue with the reading membership of the American churches, and he saw part of his role to convince them on issues of ethical importance.

Niebuhr also had opportunity to address the church at a national and international level. He served the Federal Council of Churches in the U.S.A. in a number of capacities, as well as the World Council of Churches. He addressed the Life and Work Conference at Oxford in 1937, and was one of

¹⁰ Stone has commented: "When asked about the social location of Reinhold Niebuhr, it is necessary to recall what he did. He taught ministers. This vocation is more important than class analysis in explaining his position." Ronald Stone, "The Contribution of Reinhold Niebuhr to the Late Twentieth Century" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.45.

¹¹ See for example, Robert McAfee Brown, "Reinhold Niebuhr: A Study in Humanity and Humility" in N.A. Scott, Jr. (Ed.), *The Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr*. (Chicago: University Press, 1975), p.2.

¹² In "The Greatness of Reinhold Niebuhr", *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Vol 27, No.1., 1971, pp.3f.

the key-note speakers at the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948 where he addressed the world church on "God's Design and the Present Disorder of Civilization".¹³

B. *The Academy*. Second, Niebuhr addressed the public of the academy. Quite obviously he was in dialogue with other academic theologians in the many seminaries and universities of the United States and beyond. Further, in his many preaching engagements, he more often than not addressed university audiences giving him a chance to dialogue with other academics.¹⁴

Nathan Scott Jr. sums up his influence amongst American intellectuals:

... the pressure of Reinhold Niebuhr's legacy is widely felt today as that of a towering figure in American intellectual life of the past half century... it was amongst this very numerous constituency [of intellectuals] that Niebuhr was accorded an esteem quite as notable as that wherewith he was regarded in the theological community itself...¹⁵

¹³ Published in *The Church and the Disorder of Society*, Vol III of the Amsterdam Studies. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948), pp.13-28. Another contribution by Niebuhr, "The Situation in the USA" is in the same volume, pp.80-82.

¹⁴ John Bennett writes: "His preaching in colleges and universities for four decades has been one of the factors of his very persuasive influence. Students and professors who usually stayed away from chapel would flock to hear him." "Reinhold Niebuhr's Contribution to Christian Social Ethics" in H.R. Landon (Ed.), *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Prophetic Voice in our Time*. (New York: Seabury Press, 1962). p.59.

¹⁵ In his "Introduction" to N.A. Scott, Jr. (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.ix. Scott goes on to list some of those who were influenced by Niebuhr: "by their own testimony, so diverse and representative a group of his contemporaries as the critic F.O. Matthiessen, the diplomat George Kennan, the poet W.H. Auden, the Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel, the political theorist Hans Morgenthau, the psychiatrist Robert Coles, the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and the great martyr of the Negro freedom movement, Martin Luther King, found in him a vision of the human endeavour .. that was profoundly quickening."

And at a deeper level, so much of Niebuhr's work is written in debate with the scholars of the ages. In his books one will find a discussion of Greek philosophers, thinkers of the Renaissance, Enlightenment philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes and David Hume, radical thinkers such as Marx and Freud, and United States intellectuals such as John Dewey and Aldous Huxley. Indeed, it is one of the characteristic marks of Niebuhr that he sought to address theological issues *in dialogue* with great thinkers.

While most of his earlier books were addressed to Christians and the church, it would be true to say that many of his later books on American history and international affairs were written mainly with the public of the *academy* in mind, and indeed Niebuhr had a profound influence here. Bennett writes:

Another remarkable aspect of Niebuhr's role among scholars is that he has been a formative influence on a diverse group of scholars and practitioners in the field of international relations...¹⁶

With mention of "practitioners" we are ready to turn to the third "public".

C. The Wider Society. Finally, Niebuhr's theological self-understanding was addressed to the public of the wider society. Right from his Detroit days as a pastor, Niebuhr was deeply involved in speaking to the issues and problems of society. His ground-breaking book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) is illustrative here for he speaks to the issues of class struggle, racism, injustice, war,

¹⁶ John Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Contribution to Christian Social Ethics" in H.R. Landon (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.58.

imperialism and the like. These issues continued to be the focus of his theological concerns throughout his life, and he self-consciously sought to address society on these issues.

Arguing that, apart from Martin Luther King Jr., Niebuhr had the greatest influence of any theologian and pastor on the public of the United States, Larry Rasmussen writes:

Niebuhr was a public intellectual and enjoyed it, an activist-scholar held in high respect in his culture who nonetheless cultivated a stand of sharp, independent criticism. He was, in fact, a prophet heard in the king's chapel and the king's court, chastising the certitudes of a confident culture and exposing its fault lines with rhetorical power and the sheer force of his personality.¹⁷

More than just speaking to these issues, Niebuhr was also involved personally in numerous organizations that saw his voice directed towards society.¹⁸ These included, firstly, direct political action, such as membership of the Socialist Party, the Liberal Party and then the Democratic Party, and involvement at leadership level in the Union for Democratic Action and its successor, the Americans for Democratic Action.

Secondly, he was involved in various social welfare and public pressure groups such as the Delta Cooperative Farm in Hillhouse, Mississippi and the Southern Tenant Farmer's Union, the American Association for Exiled Professionals and the American Palestine Committee, and in later years he lent his voice to the Civil Rights and Anti-Vietnam campaigns.

¹⁷ In the "Introduction", Larry Rasmussen (Ed.), *op. cit.* p.1.

¹⁸ Nathan Scott, Jr., gives a good list of all Niebuhr's political activities, in *The Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr*. (Chicago: University Press, 1975). p.xx., as does Rasmussen (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.11f.

A third area of involvement was in holding responsible public positions. He was a member of the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations, served as a member of the U.S. delegation to the UNESCO conference in Paris, and was a consultant for the U.S. State Department's Policy Planning Staff.

In his discussion on the three publics, Tracy has written that

Whatever the social location of a particular theology, that common commitment [to genuine public discourse] demands a commitment to authentic publicness, the attempt to speak from a particular social locus in such a manner that one also speaks across the range of all three publics.¹⁹

This, says Tracy, is so both in principle and in fact. Niebuhr is a good example of Tracy's thesis, for he self-consciously strove to speak to the three publics in terms that would help them dialogue with each other and be informed by the concerns and insights of the other. This was so much the case that Bennett notes, "I doubt if we can make a very clear distinction between the substance of what he says explicitly as a theologian and churchman, and what he says when he speaks to the public".²⁰

Paul Ramsey concurs when he claims that Reinhold Niebuhr was the last theologian in this country who did and could speak in the public forum unembarrassed by pluralism, while addressing moral and political issues in an unembarrassed way from a theological and biblical point of view.²¹

¹⁹ David Tracy, *op. cit.*, p.5.

²⁰ John Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Contribution to Christian Social Ethics" in H.R. Landon (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.61f. Bennett does note, however that this was not always an easy task, and was "a problem raised by Niebuhr's thought".

²¹ In Paul T. Stallsworth, "The Story of an Encounter" in R.J. Neuhaus (Ed.), *Reinhold Niebuhr Today*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p.83. In immediate response to Ramsey, John Cuddihy strongly disagrees:

In this dialogue between the "publics", Niebuhr also self-consciously sought an integrity of purpose, the "authentic publicness" that Tracy talks about. He sought to speak to the *church* in dialogue with the best insights of the *academy* about the *society*. He sought to bring the pressing issues of the *society* as a challenge to the *academy* so that the insights of the *church* would be appreciated anew. And he sought to minister to *society* with the help of the insights of both the *academy* and the *church*.

In this regard, the assessments of Niebuhr's work are of one accord. Bob Patterson notes that "he restored words like *sin, grace, judgement, conscience, obligation, and mercy* to the American vocabulary",²² and Larry Rasmussen writes:

Probably more than any other U.S. theologian, Niebuhr moved with utter ease between the language of Zion and that of regnant secular culture, and he made his choices as the occasion suggested.²³

The historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. has written, "No man has had as much influence as a preacher in this generation; no preacher has had as much influence in the secular world",²⁴ and the theologian Emil Brunner comments:

Reinhold Niebuhr has realized, as no one else has, what I have been postulating for decades but could not accomplish to any degree in an atmosphere ruled by abstract dogmatism: namely, theology in conversation with the leading intellects of the age.²⁵

"Niebuhr was one of the first to be totally embarrassed by pluralism". The thrust of my argument, as presented below, agrees with Ramsey.

²² Bob E. Patterson. *Reinhold Niebuhr*. (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1977), pp.16f.

²³ Larry Rasmussen (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.3.

²⁴ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. "Reinhold Niebuhr's Rôle in American Political Thought and Life" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.213.

²⁵ Emil Brunner, "Some Remarks on Reinhold Niebuhr's Work as a Christian Thinker" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.83.

That it was not always an easy task to move between these three publics is not surprising. Something of this struggle to bridge the publics is illustrated by Niebuhr's comment in 1963 upon his major work of the early 1940's, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*:

I used the traditional religious symbols of the "Fall" and of "original sin" to counter these conceptions [of evil]. My only regret is that I did not realize that the legendary character of the one and the dubious connotations of the other would prove so offensive to the modern mind, that my use of them obscured my essential thesis and my "realistic" rather than "idealistic" interpretation of human nature.²⁶

A second problem with this search for "authentic publicness", was that in so modifying the language of Zion to speak to secular culture, Niebuhr's theological concern and Christian commitment was obscured.²⁷ However, there is no doubt that Paul Merkley is correct in rejecting the possibility of appropriating Niebuhr's political theory without his theology (the "Atheists for Niebuhr" suggested by Morton White). "Niebuhr's own politics cannot at any point be disengaged ... from his theology", he writes.

Reinhold Niebuhr's *unmatched* influence upon the imagination of the liberal-intellectual generation of the middle decades of this century is owing to the theological ground of his work, and reflects

²⁶ "Preface for the Scribner Library Edition" of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vols I and II. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941 and 1943). A year before this Niebuhr referred to a conversation with Paul Tillich in which he made the same point: "I confessed that I had made a mistake in hurling the traditional symbols of Christian realism - the fall and original sin - in the teeth of modern culture when I sought to criticize the undue optimism of the culture. Both these symbols, though historically significant, are subject to misunderstanding in a secular culture." in "The Response of Reinhold Niebuhr" in H.R. Landon (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.120.

²⁷ See for example, Larry Rasmussen (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.3.

the continuing dependence of political discussion upon ethics, and of ethics upon theology.²⁸

Language aside, there is another difficulty in the search for "authentic publicness" for Niebuhr, and it is perhaps the most awkward tension of all. Niebuhr's theological vision emphasized the need for society and culture to be grounded upon the Christian faith, and yet his political vision emphasized the need for pluralism and tolerance. Niebuhr's biographer, Richard Fox calls this idea of an open society founded upon a prior religious consensus, "the fundamental ambiguity in Niebuhr's public theology".

Niebuhr wriggles out of the inconsistency by avoiding the question of how a religious consensus could be constructed in a culturally heterogeneous society.²⁹

Fox goes on to suggest that while he avoided this question, he nevertheless assumed for himself the right to subject the secular world to a Christian prophetic critique.

Niebuhr's own identity as Christian man-of-the-world, as religious-secular leader par excellence, was a brilliant enactment, at the personal level, of his own public theology. The secular world was a realm of value, but its reserves of virtue were limited and had to be replenished by religion - not the religion of the churches, which Niebuhr always regarded as tepid and complacent, but the religion of the prophets.³⁰

What Fox is suggesting here is that Niebuhr's manner of uniting the two realms of theology and secular society was not in some intellectual synthesis, but in and through his personal capacity as prophet and preacher. We have already

²⁸ Paul Merkley, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Political Account*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975), p.viii.

²⁹ Richard Wightman Fox, "Niebuhr's World and Ours" in R.J. Neuhaus (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.14f.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.14f.

noted the importance of Niebuhr as a preacher in the church, but we need to remind ourselves that this was the role in which Niebuhr confronted not only the public of the church, but also the public of the academy and of the wider society.

Harold Landon notes this:

Reinhold Niebuhr's primary vocation, it should never be forgotten, has been to preach the gospel in such a way as to make it credible to modern men. He found meaning and coherence in all that his mind explored. He brought new areas of knowledge in anthropology, psychology, sociology and history into the context of Christian thought. This is the first basic element in his life and thought.³¹

And it is this concern to speak to the three publics out of the passion and prior faith commitment of a prophet and preacher which leads Niebuhr to his embarrassment with being called a theologian. He speaks of himself as "as a kind of circuit rider in the colleges and universities" with a strong pragmatic interest and who has "never been very competent in the nice points of pure theology":

I have been frequently challenged by the stricter sects of theologians in Europe to prove that my interests were theological rather than practical or "apologetic," but I have always refused to enter a defense, partly because I thought the point was well taken and partly because the distinction did not interest me.³²

From this perspective we can begin to identify Niebuhr's theological task.

³¹ "Editor's Introduction" in H.R. Landon (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.14.

³² Reinhold Niebuhr, "Intellectual Biography" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.3.

1.3. The Preacher's Message: Human Responsibility.

If it is in Niebuhr's role as preacher to the church, to the academy and to wider society that we find a clue to the integration of these three in his self-understanding as a theologian, then it is clear that the message that he charges each with has to do with human responsibility. This was so much the case that James Gustafson can say of Niebuhr's thought: "Theology is more in the service of ethics, I believe than ethics is in the service of theology".³³

Indeed, the question that dominates Niebuhr's writings and actions is not so much the question as to "What is true?", but rather, the question: "How shall I live my life?", and further "How shall we live our lives?". This is borne out by the well-known evaluation from Paul Tillich:

Niebuhr does not ask, "How can I know?"; he starts knowing. And he does not ask afterward, "How could I know?", but leaves the convincing power of his thought without epistemological support.³⁴

Niebuhr's response to this bears out our characterization of him as a preacher, but also underlines his impatience with epistemology:

The point at issue between us is the old and yet ever new problem of the relation of faith to reason. I think that is what he means by saying that I have inadequate epistemology. I can find no way of proving by any epistemological method that God, the creator, is revealed as forgiving love in the drama of Christ's life, death, and

³³ This is in fact the title of his essay: James Gustafson, "Theology in the Service of Ethics: An Interpretation of Reinhold Niebuhr's Theological Ethics" in R. Harries (Ed.), *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of our Time*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p.38.

³⁴ Paul Tillich, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Knowledge" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.90.

resurrection. Upon that faith the Christian Church is founded.³⁵

Yet, while he clearly affirms the faith of the Christian Church, Niebuhr is not satisfied with the simple answer to the question "How shall we live our lives?", that "we must live as a Christian", for he is aware of the ambiguity contained in such a response. He was highly critical, for example, of the type of Christianity preached by Billy Graham, because it did not really get to the heart of the matter.

Billy Graham thinks that the problem of atomic warfare could be solved if one could convert "bad" people to become "good" so that they would not use atomic weapons. But he cannot have anything to say to good people who are increasingly concerned about the undue reliance of our nation upon nuclear weapons but who do not find it possible to be responsible for the security of our civilization and simply renounce nuclear weapons.³⁶

The type of Christian faith represented by Graham then has nothing to say to those who seek "to be responsible". And, in the end, that is the answer that Niebuhr gives to the question "How shall we live our lives". For him the answer is, "We must live in the most *responsible* manner", and this meant a passion for love and for justice, inspired by the prophetic tradition of the Christian faith.

Identifying Niebuhr with Christian pragmatism, Ruurd Veldhuis has written:

Christian pragmatism advocates an ethic of responsibility. "Life has no meaning except in terms of responsibility"; responsibility means a willingness to respond both to the facts and to the law of love. It asks: what is the real situation, what are the possibilities, and how

³⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.508.

³⁶ "Editorial Notes", *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol 26 No.3, 1956.

can we preserve "what is relatively good against what is explicitly evil?"³⁷

James Gustafson discerns the same thrust in Niebuhr:

If one takes the Weberian distinction between an ethic of conscience and an ethic of cultural or social responsibility, it is clear that Niebuhr's work fits the latter type.³⁸

The search for human responsibility thus dominates Niebuhr's thinking. It rises midst the questions he asks to Henry Ford about charity and exploitation; it dominates the questions about U.S. isolationism and imperialism; it underlies his thinking about world government and the atomic bomb; it forments within his economic thinking causing a movement from socialism to social welfare free-market economics; and it looms large over his discussion about racism in the U.S. both in terms of white exploitation and black responses.

In dialogue with other theologians, Paul Ramsey can therefore say:

I haven't the slightest notion that Niebuhr thought we could make history come out right. But he did think that people could take significant action in a particular time, that responsible action was possible. Niebuhr was no survivalist, nor was he a utilitarian calculator. He was a *responsibilist*. "And now we come," he would have thought, "in the rise and fall of nations and empires, to another time. And in this particular hour a call is issued." And that call is a call to responsibility.³⁹

³⁷ Ruurd Veldhuis, *Realism versus Utopianism*, (Assen, the Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1975), p.117. In this comment, the first quotation is from June Bingham, *Courage to Change*; and the second from Davis and Good (Eds.) *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*. See Veldhuis for the specific references.

³⁸ James Gustafson, "Theology in the Service of Ethics: An Interpretation of Reinhold Niebuhr's Theological Ethics" in R. Harries (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.30.

³⁹ Paul Ramsey in dialogue in "The Story of an Encounter" in R.J. Neuhaus (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.114. Emphasis mine. In this specific dialogue, Stanley Hauerwas agreed that Niebuhr was calling the world to be responsible although he felt it was 'Constantinian' to do so. This

In sum, then, we could say that Niebuhr's underlying theological self-understanding that cuts across the three publics and that calls them into dialogue with each other is the demand to be ethically responsible. It is a demand he makes as prophet and preacher to the church, to the academy, and in the end where it matters most, to the wider society.

1.4. Human Destiny, Salvation and Ethics.

There is a conflict of interpretation as to the influence of human nature on the one hand and human destiny on the other upon Niebuhr's ethical system. To grasp this we need to first make clear what we understand by these two terms. In a number of places Dennis McCann has contrasted them as theological anthropology and theology of history. We can see this by his addition of parenthesis to this note by Niebuhr on his task in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*:

This work is "devoted to the thesis that the two main emphases of Western culture, namely, the sense of individuality (*I: Human Nature*) and the sense of meaningful history (*II: Human Destiny*), were rooted in the faith of the Bible and had primarily Hebraic roots."⁴⁰

It is our contention that this is a misunderstanding of Niebuhr's use of the terms. *Human nature* certainly refers to anthropology, but never in a way divorced from history. The whole point of his anthropology has to do with the

is very similar to a critique from John Howard Yoder on Niebuhr's use of responsibility in *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism*. (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1968), p.18.

⁴⁰ Denis McCann, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Jacques Maritain on Marxism: A Comparison of Two Tradition Models of Practical Theology" in *The Journal of Religion*. Vol 58, No.2, April 1978. p.147. The additions by McCann are emphasized. This is also the interpretation he gives in *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology*, op. cit., pp.52-76.

implications for humans in the light of historical existence.⁴¹ A theology of history is therefore part of human nature. *Human destiny*, on the other hand, is tied to soteriology, and the effects of salvation upon both the individual and history.

We shall therefore use *human nature* to refer to Niebuhr's understanding of the human situation prior to salvation, and *human destiny* as the possibilities for humanity as a result of salvation.⁴²

We noted above, that a number of interpreters have placed Niebuhr's ethics within the framework of his understanding of *human nature*. Bob Patterson writes:

His system finds its beginning in the *doctrine* of man, and other doctrines are dealt with by indirection. This doctrine, his chief contribution to theology, is *determinative for his ethics*, his view of history, his Christology, his doctrine of the Atonement and his eschatology.⁴³

This position is also taken by Judith Vaughn:

For Niebuhr, the *doctrine of human nature* plays the *determining* role in the development of an ethical system.⁴⁴

⁴¹ We agree with Gordon Harland who comments on Niebuhr's thought: "First, in order to comprehend the distinctively human, we must understand its history. Man is that being who has a history. If we are to understand the human, in either its personal or collective dimensions, we must know its history". *The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p.91.

⁴² Although he does not use the terms nature and destiny, something of our understanding of the two terms is captured by Ronald Stone in this conclusion to his book: "A contrast which appears throughout his work is the relationship of the ideal to the real. The relationship of man's hopes for community [*i.e. human destiny*] to the real communities in which he lives [*i.e. human nature*] is the central problem in political philosophy for Niebuhr". *Op. cit.*, p.242. The emphasized additions are ours.

⁴³ Bob E. Paterson, *op. cit.*, p.63. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁴ Judith Vaughn, *Sociality, Ethics and Social Change: A Critical Appraisal of Reinhold Niebuhr's Ethics in the Light of Rosemary Radford Ruether's Works*. (Lanham, MD.: University Press of America, 1983), p.17. Emphasis mine.

It is also argued by William Wolf:

Niebuhr makes one doctrine, brilliantly plumbed to its depths, the basis of his whole thought. Articulated in terms of man's relations with his fellow men, *the doctrine of man is determinative for his social ethics* and for his interpretation of the meaningfulness of history.⁴⁵

And again by James Gustafson:

Reinhold Niebuhr is little occupied with salvation from sin; he is much occupied with the development of a theological anthropology that accounts for the deception and the possibilities of moral and political action in history.⁴⁶

John Howard Yoder argues the same position, and adds his cutting critique:

For Niebuhr derives his ethics from the fact of *mans predicament*, and the Bible derives not only ethics, but everything from the fact of God's redemption.⁴⁷

Yet, if we are correct in understanding Niebuhr's message as one of responsibility, then we need to ask whether a contemplation of human nature alone can lead to an ethic of responsibility. To call people to be responsible needs a vision of what is possible and what can be hoped for. This is a vision of *human destiny*. It is our contention that as preacher, Niebuhr's demand for responsibility was fundamentally located within the framework of the limits and possibilities of *human destiny* as understood and informed by the Cross of Christ, in other words, the doctrine of salvation.

⁴⁵ William John Wolf, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.230. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁶ James Gustafson, "Theology in the Service of Ethics: An Interpretation of Reinhold Niebuhr's Theological Ethics" in R. Harries (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.39f.

⁴⁷ John Howard Yoder, *op. cit.*, p.20. Emphasis mine.

For Niebuhr therefore, ethics flows from soteriology rather than from anthropology. This interpretation would of course be rejected by those who see his anthropology as determinative, such as Yoder:

Those Christian doctrines which relate to the redemption are consistently slighted by Niebuhr, transferred to another realm of being, or read as mythological expressions of mans capacities for transcendence.⁴⁸

Nevertheless we would therefore concur with those interpreters who see the significance of human destiny for his ethics. D.R. Davies writes:

We have now to examine how Niebuhr solved the problem of making revolution significant, of the relation between historic frustration and spiritual fulfilment. This involves *the whole problem of the destiny of man* both as individual and society, which presents itself as the question: What is the final purpose of the whole historic process?⁴⁹

Douglas Hall identifies that the answer to Davies' question about human destiny has to do with soteriology, and this then is central for Niebuhr's ethics:

A very good case could be made, I think, for claiming that Reinhold Niebuhr was driven to his abiding vocational concern for Christian ethics because his understanding of the nature of salvation was what it was.⁵⁰

This is also argued by Theodore Minnema:

The theological framework in which Niebuhr's social ethics are formulated finds its focal point in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. And it is from this point that the specific content of the ethical norm proceeds.⁵¹

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.20.

⁴⁹ D.R. Davies, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet from America*. (London: James Clarke, undated) p.50. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁰ Douglas Hall, "The Cross and Contemporary Culture" in R. Harries (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.198.

⁵¹ Theodore Minnema, *The Social Ethics of Reinhold Niebuhr, A Structural Analysis*. (Amsterdam: J.H. Kok N.V. Kampen, 1958), p.55.

Minnema points us to the content of salvation: the work of Christ on the Cross understood through the doctrine of the Atonement as justification by faith. So Paul Lehmann identifies Christology - understood in relationship to soteriology⁵² - as "the leitmotiv of Reinhold Niebuhr's theology".⁵³ And turning other interpretations on their head, he comments:

Plainly, if unobtrusively, Niebuhr's account of Jesus Christ is the presupposition of his anthropology.⁵⁴

Lehmann's interpretation is specifically affirmed by Niebuhr himself in a response to Lehmann:

The situation is that I have come gradually to realize that it is not possible to look at the human situation without illusion and without despair only from the standpoint of the Christ-revelation. It has come to be more and more the ultimate truth.⁵⁵

It is clear then that there are two ways of understanding Niebuhr's ethics. In the first instance it is seen to arise out of his understanding of *human nature*, and in the second, from his understanding of *human destiny*. Perhaps John Bennett is right in seeing the influence of both:

Closely related in Niebuhr's thought to the doctrine of man is the doctrine of justification. The former is the source of our idea of the limits and the direction of our social purposes. The latter is the source of motive and morale for

⁵² In this essay Lehmann shows the significance of the saving work of Christ to Niebuhr's Christology. See "The Christology of Reinhold Niebuhr" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.252-280.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.253.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.254.

⁵⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism", in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.515.

ethical living amidst the moral ambiguities of historical existence.⁵⁶

Yet, even from Bennett's comment it is clear that the driving force, in his words, the "*motive and morale* for ethical living", comes from the doctrine of justification, in other words from soteriology. If, as we have argued, the call to responsibility is the key theme of Niebuhr's ethics, then we are correct in seeing this as best interpreted in the framework of human destiny or soteriology.

Mindful of the significance of his thought on human nature and anthropology for ethics, this thesis therefore stands with those interpreters who see the fundamental significance of soteriology for Niebuhr's ethics, and then seeks to develop this as a hermeneutical key that opens up Niebuhr's thought in new and creative ways.

1.5. The Centrality of Soteriology.

To clarify our position, we need to argue the case for the centrality of soteriology in his thought as a whole. We shall organize our thought around three themes: (A) redemption; (B) the Atonement; and (C) the Cross.

A. *The concern with redemption.* Niebuhr returns time and again to the theme of redemption (which we take to be synonymous with salvation.) This theme already has a central place as early as in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932). The book is a rebuke by Niebuhr of Christian liberalism, particularly its stress upon education and

⁵⁶ John Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethics" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.104.

religio-moral resources in the search for a just and democratic society. What is important for us to note is how Niebuhr utilizes the theme of redemption in his critique:

The undoubted moral resources of religion seem to justify the religious moralists in their hope for the *redemption of society* through the increase of religio-moral resources. In their most unqualified form, these hopes are vain.⁵⁷

and again:

While this hope of the educators, which in America finds its most telling presentation in the educational philosophy of Professor John Dewey, has some justification, *political redemption* through education is not as easily achieved as the educators assume.⁵⁸

In his discussion on the contribution of other worldviews in the search for ethical responsibility, Niebuhr also talks about the "redemptive mission" of the working class to modern society,⁵⁹ and the potential "redemptive social consequences" of pure religious idealism.⁶⁰

Redemption is thus a central underlying theme which Niebuhr uses in his argument and thesis of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (although the word itself is not frequently used). Serving to emphasize my point is the fact that in the last two paragraphs of the book, Niebuhr makes use of the theme to drive home his thesis:

... Yet there is beauty in our tragedy. We are, at least, rid of some of our illusions. We can no longer buy the highest satisfactions of the individual life at the expense of social injustice. We cannot build our individual ladders to heaven and leave the total *human enterprise unredeemed* of its excesses and corruptions.

In the task of *that redemption* the most

⁵⁷ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), p.63. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁸ *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. p.212. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁹ *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. p.229.

⁶⁰ *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. p.264.

effective agents will be men who have substituted some new illusions for the abandoned ones. The most important of these illusions is that the collective life of mankind can achieve perfect justice....⁶¹

That Niebuhr continued to characterize other worldviews under the theme of redemption is illustrated by his passing comment in *Christianity and Power Politics* that he has "a file which already contains eighty-two different recipes for world salvation".⁶² Niebuhr returns to a more formal critique of other worldviews on the basis of the theme of redemption in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, where again he criticizes the "hopes for redemption" of modern society. Later, as if recognizing the centrality of this theme, Niebuhr began in fact to characterize and critique these worldviews precisely as "secular religions of world redemption",⁶³ and then in *Faith and History* he calls them "creeds of world redemption":

There is a grim irony in the fact that mankind is at the moment in the toils of the terrible fate of a division between two great centres of power, one of which is informed by the communist and the other by the bourgeois liberal creed of world redemption.⁶⁴

In his address to the World Council of Churches assembly in Amsterdam in 1948, Niebuhr chose this important opportunity to deal with these creeds of world redemption, criticizing the "liberal idea of redemption through growth and development" and the "Marxist ideal of redemption

⁶¹ *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. p.277. Emphasis mine.

⁶² *Christianity and Power Politics*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), p.168. Emphasis mine.

⁶³ "Two Forms of Utopianism", *Christianity and Society*, Vol 12, No.4. 1947, p.6.

⁶⁴ Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), p.84. Emphasis mine.

through the death of our foes and the socialization of property".⁶⁵

In the midst of the 1950's Cold War, Niebuhr's criticism of Liberalism began to wane, and he focussed more and more upon what he saw as the great danger of Communism. In keeping with the centrality of the theme of redemption, it is crucial to note that for Niebuhr the key "fault" with Communism was not to do with any specific political or economic act, but rather in its pretension to having achieved redemption in society:

It is not surprising that this version of Hegelian logic should have become plausible enough to become the basis of a new world religion: and one which fills the world with cruelty and with pretensions of world dominion in the name of world redemption.⁶⁶

Niebuhr believed that the fault with these "creeds of world redemption", as in the false redemption offered by other worldviews lay in their misunderstanding of the relationship between redemption and history. Here again we can see in this debate on the meaning of history - a matter of absolute importance to Niebuhr's whole theological enterprise - the centrality of the theme of redemption.

Nowhere is this clearer than in Niebuhr's book *Faith and History*, sub-titled "A comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History". In his preface to the book Niebuhr captures the thesis he wishes to present:

The real alternative to the Christian faith elaborated by modern secular culture was the idea

⁶⁵ "The Christian Witness in the Social and National Order" in *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), pp.106f.

⁶⁶ Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), p.124.

that history is itself Christ, which is to say that historical development is *redemptive*. Typical modern theology accommodated itself to *this secular scheme of redemption* much too readily. Meanwhile the experiences of contemporary man have refuted the modern faith in the *redemptive* character of history itself. This refutation has given the Christian faith, as presented in the Bible, a new relevance.⁶⁷

Again and again, Niebuhr makes a central point in his discussion of history the fact that history is not in itself redemptive. "We have learned", he writes in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* "that history is not its own redeemer. The 'long run' of it is no more redemptive in the ultimate sense than the 'short run'".⁶⁸ Again, in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* he writes, "modern history is an almost perfect refutation of modern faith in a redemptive history. History is creative but not redemptive".⁶⁹ We shall have occasion to look in more detail at the meaning of and reasons for this statement, but at this stage we need only note its significance - that this basic statement of Niebuhr's ideas on history, (which is repeated regularly⁷⁰), establishes again the centrality of the theme of "redemption" in the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr. Hans Hoffmann is thus surely correct when he points out that Niebuhr has examined various worldviews

from the point of view of the gospel, not in order to cast them easily aside but that he may understand them in their historical setting and so evaluate their immanent and temporal significance. But precisely thereby he is enabled to repudiate

⁶⁷ *Faith and History*, p.viii. Emphasis mine.

⁶⁸ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol.2. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), p.206.

⁶⁹ *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), p.132.

⁷⁰ See for example, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*. p.143; "Faith for a Hazardous Future" in Larry Rasmussen (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.276.

their hidden or open claims to be ways of faith which provide the possibility of redemption from our historical enslavement, and so to be rivals of the gospel.⁷¹

We can see the central place that the theme of redemption (or salvation) holds in Niebuhr's theology. We have argued above that his ethics flows from his soteriology, and we can close this section with this oft quoted, profound statement of faith from Niebuhr, which holds together the central themes and relationships of ethics and soteriology:

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.⁷²

B. *The centrality of the Atonement.* Having established that the theme of "redemption" is a central one for Niebuhr, we need to go further and note how a specifically Christian understanding of redemption - the doctrine of the Atonement grounded in the Cross of Christ - plays an even more central role in his theology and understanding of the world and history. Comparing Niebuhr's theology of history with that of the "theology of hope", Langdon Gilkey writes:

Atonement rather than the Resurrection represents the centre of the Gospel and is for Niebuhr - as the Resurrection with its promise of a new, qualitatively different future is for the

⁷¹ Hans Hoffmann, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), p.14. Emphasis mine.

⁷² Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), p.63.

eschatologists - the key to the interpretation of history.⁷³

This focus is echoed by John Flynn:

Niebuhr's primary interest is not with the resurrection nor with the incarnation. He concerns himself almost exclusively with the Atonement, the Cross of Christ.⁷⁴

In the introduction to a book of Niebuhr's sermons and prayers that she edited after his death, Niebuhr's wife, Ursula comments: "In his prayers, the same theme appears as in his sermons; the mystery of creation and redemption."⁷⁵ Here in the "public" of the church, Niebuhr could be expected to speak forcefully on redemption through the Cross of Christ. What is most enlightening, however, is how Niebuhr strives for that "authentic publicness" that Tracy speaks of.⁷⁶ He draws the doctrine of the Atonement into the centre of his thought addressed not just to the public of the church, but also to the publics of the academy and society. "Niebuhr's theology", writes Rasmussen with reference to the meaning of the Atonement for Niebuhr, "begins and ends in grace, and justification by grace through faith is the heart of both his theology and his piety".⁷⁷

⁷³ Langdon Gilkey, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology of History" in N.S. Scott, Jr. (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.52.

⁷⁴ John L. Flynn, *Justification: A Comparison of the doctrine of Reinhold Niebuhr with the Doctrine of the Council of Trent*, (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1970), p.19. While Flynn notes this exclusivity he is uncomfortable with it, and adds in a footnote, "Shirley Guthrie, among others, refers to this almost exclusive interest of Niebuhr in the doctrine of the Atonement to the neglect of the Incarnation. *The Theological Character of Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethic*, p.121."

⁷⁵ Niebuhr in *Justice and Mercy*, U.M. Niebuhr (Ed.). (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p.8.

⁷⁶ David Tracy, *op. cit.*, p.5.

⁷⁷ Larry Rasmussen, (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.24.

In a collection of sermons Niebuhr describes the Atonement as "the final meaning and the final mystery of the relation of God to man",⁷⁸ and in another collection of "sermonic essays", *Beyond Tragedy*, he writes:

... the fact is that the atoning death of Christ is the revelation of ultimate reality which may become *the principle of interpretation for all human experience*.....

Most profoundly the Atonement of Christ is a revelation of what life actually is.⁷⁹

A clear indication of the centrality of the doctrine of the Atonement for Niebuhr is the design of his two-volumed theological magnum opus, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Paul Lehmann notes that "their main concern is with the truth and relevance of the doctrine of the Atonement", and Kenneth Durkin adds that this doctrine "provides the key to interpretation for the whole work, and for nature, life and history,"⁸⁰ Indeed, in the first volume, *Human Nature*, Niebuhr specifically underlines the centrality of the doctrine of the Atonement:

The doctrine of Atonement and justification is the 'stone which the builders rejected' and must be made 'the head of the corner'. It is an absolutely essential presupposition for the understanding of human nature and human history.⁸¹

The fact that this is for Niebuhr the unique contribution of Christianity to understanding human nature and destiny and hence that it is the key to his own thought, emerges in the design of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* which is as follows:

⁷⁸ *Discerning the Signs of the Times* (London: SCM, 1946), p.128.

⁷⁹ *Beyond Tragedy*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), pp.19f.

⁸⁰ Kenneth Durkin, *Reinhold Niebuhr* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989), p.101.

⁸¹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), p.148.

Book I: Human Nature.

- * The problem of human nature and the root thereof (chapters one and two);
- * Modern Culture's response to the problem and its failure to account for sin (chapters three and four);
- * Revelation: the ground of the Christian view (chapter five);
- * The Christian view of human nature - a creature created in the "Image of God", sinful yet with "original righteousness" (chapters six through ten).

Book II: Human Destiny

- * Human expectations of a Christ (chapter one);
- * Christ and the Atonement (chapters two and three);
- * The meaning of living under Grace, its relevance to human destiny, and the implications of this for truth, justice and history (chapters four through ten).

Leaving aside the analysis of other philosophies, the real heart of Niebuhr's argument is thus the movement from the discussion of the Christian view of human nature - in chapters six to ten of *Book I: Human Nature* to the explication of what it means for human destiny to live under grace - in chapters four through ten in *Book II: Human Destiny*. Between these two lies his discussion of the Atonement, and this is because it provides the key to that movement from nature to destiny. In fact, one could argue that the whole section of living under grace is another way of saying "living with the results of the Atonement". Thus Bob Patterson can say

The central truth embodied in the doctrine of the Atonement is that the justice and mercy of God are one. Niebuhr's chief concern in volume two of his Gifford Lectures was with the truth and relevance of this doctrine.⁸²

Kenneth Durkin, who perhaps more than any other interpreter has identified the importance of the doctrine of

⁸² Bob E. Patterson, *op. cit.*, p.108.

the Atonement for Niebuhr's thought, argues that *The Nature and Destiny of Man* makes it the "principle of coherence" for life:

In Volume II of *Nature and Destiny* Niebuhr establishes the fact that the myth of the Atonement is the centre of meaning for life and experience. If any other principle of coherence is postulated, either explicitly or implicitly, it is of necessity a subordinate centre...⁸³

In accord with this, when Niebuhr proposes a synthesis of the respective contributions of the Reformation and the Renaissance to human destiny, in the final paragraphs preceding his discussion on the implications of living under grace in the areas of truth, justice and history, he draws to a close all his preceding thoughts and sums up the centrality of the Atonement with these words:

The Christian doctrine of the Atonement, with its paradoxical conception of the relation of the divine mercy to the divine wrath is therefore the final key to this historical interpretation.⁸⁴

While the doctrine of the Atonement is never again given such a systematic interpretation in Niebuhr's works, it does not cease to be important. Paul Lehmann sees the same theme emerging in *Faith and History*:

The Cross as the meaning and fulfillment of "the whole character of human history" is expounded on a grand scale in Professor Niebuhr's latest systematic work. And with this more explicit elaboration, the central characteristic of his Christology becomes unmistakable.... What orthodox Christology tried to express in the doctrine of the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ, Niebuhr accepts and explores in its significance for man.⁸⁵

⁸³ Kenneth Durkin, *op. cit.*, p.110.

⁸⁴ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.211.

⁸⁵ Paul Lehmann, "The Christology of Reinhold Niebuhr" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.349. Kenneth Durkin interprets Lehmann's concern thus: "According to Lehmann the central concern of *Nature and Destiny* and *Faith and History* is to show how the Cross expresses the

And of an even later work, *The Self and the Dramas of History*, Durkin can say, "there is the same insistence on the Atonement as the principle of coherence."⁸⁶

C. *The focus on the Cross of Christ.* We have seen now that the theme of redemption is central to the thought of Niebuhr, and we have seen that the Christian understanding of redemption as expressed in the doctrine of the Atonement holds a key place in the design and argument of his major systematic theological work. Finally, in establishing the importance of the doctrine of the Atonement for Niebuhr, and thus as a legitimate focus of our enquiry, we will examine some of Niebuhr's reflections on the Cross of Christ.

For Niebuhr, the doctrine of the Atonement is Christian reflection upon the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross. So we need, therefore, to recognize that insofar as Niebuhr is dealing with and reflecting upon the significance and meaning of the Cross in the light of human nature and destiny, he is exploring the doctrine of the Atonement.

Now it is clear that the Cross is a central focus for Niebuhr's thinking. Paul Lehmann sees the focus on the Cross as early as *Does Christianity Need Religion?*⁸⁷ and

transcendental reality of Christ (*pro nobis*) and the transforming power of Christ (*in nobis*) in human nature and destiny, which is to say that the central concern of both works is an exposition of the Atonement and its anthropological corollary, justification by faith." See Kenneth Durkin, *op. cit.*, p.178.

⁸⁶ Kenneth Durkin, *op. cit.*, p.166.

⁸⁷ "The central concern is the meaningfulness and the transforming power of Jesus Christ in the world in which the Cross occurred. Jesus Christ and His Cross - this is what the religion of Jesus is all about". Paul Lehmann, "The Christology of Reinhold Niebuhr" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.336.

certainly in *Reflections on the End of an Era*.⁸⁸ The continuing importance of this theme has been demonstrated in Douglas Hall's reflections upon Niebuhr's *theologia crucis*.

I believe that what Professor Niebuhr gleaned from his life-long and varied exposure to Luther was what is commonly referred to as Luther's *theologia crucis*. So far as I am aware, Niebuhr has not used this technical term in any of his writings; but the essential ingredients of this minority traditions are all... conspicuously present in his work.⁸⁹

And furthermore

It is this cruciform "logic" that informs every major theo-historical judgement of Reinhold Niebuhr.⁹⁰

As early as 1925 Niebuhr was beginning to sense the centrality of the Cross as the following reflection makes clear:

We had a communion service tonight (Good Friday) and I preached on the text "We preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Gentiles foolishness, but to them that are called the power of God and the wisdom of God". I don't think I ever felt greater joy in preaching a sermon. How experience and life change our perspectives! It was only a few years ago that I did not know what to make of the cross; at least I made no more of it than to recognize it as a historic fact which proved the necessity of paying a high price for our ideals. Now I see it is a symbol of ultimate reality.

It seems pathetic to me that liberalism has too little appreciation of the tragedy of life to understand the cross and orthodoxy insists too much upon the absolute uniqueness of the sacrifice of Christ to make the preaching of the cross

⁸⁸ "A still stronger statement of the central position of Jesus Christ and His Cross in Niebuhr's theology occurs at the close of the *Reflections*", Paul Lehmann, "The Christology of Reinhold Niebuhr" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.338.

⁸⁹ Douglas Hall, "The Cross and Contemporary Culture" in R. Harries (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.190.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.193. Richard Harries interprets Hall to be saying "The *theologia crucis* however, is not for Niebuhr any more than it is for Moltmann simply about the Atonement. It is a way of looking at things which permeates all life and all theology." See his "Introduction" to this volume, p.7.

effective. How can anything be uniquely potent if it is absolutely unique. It is because *the cross of Christ symbolizes in the very heart of reality*, something in universal experience that it has its central place in history. Life is tragic and the most perfect type of moral beauty inevitably has at least a touch of tragic in it. Why? That is not so easy to explain. But love pays such a high price for its objectives and sets its objective so high that they can never be attained.. There is therefore always a foolish and futile aspect to love's quest which give it the note of tragedy.

What makes this tragedy redemptive is that the foolishness of love is revealed as wisdom in the end and its futility becomes the occasion for new moral striving. About heroes, saints, and saviours it must always remain true "that they, without us should not be made perfect."⁹¹

This may not have been the first time that Niebuhr preached on that specific text taken from I Corinthians 1:18-31, but it was certainly not the last. Again and again Niebuhr would return to this passage in Paul's letter as a theme for his sermons and a grounding for his theology, for as Fackre puts it for Niebuhr, "The happening on a hill corresponds to the deepest level of the structures of reality and its ultimate issue".⁹²

In the collection of sermons in *Beyond Tragedy* two of them are drawn from this text,⁹³ while many of the others draw from the theme of the Cross. Again, in another collection of sermons, *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, he speaks of the "Power and weakness of God" in reference to the theme of the Cross.⁹⁴ Also in *Justice and Mercy* there is a sermon on the theme of "The Son of Man must Suffer".⁹⁵

⁹¹ Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*. (New York: Meridian Books, 1957. First published 1929), pp.106f. Emphasis mine.

⁹² Gabriel Fackre, *The Promise of Reinhold Niebuhr*. (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1970), p.44.

⁹³ "The Transvaluation of Values" and "The Things that Are and the Things that Are Not" in *Beyond Tragedy*, pp.197ff; 217ff.

⁹⁴ *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, pp.116ff.

⁹⁵ *Justice and Mercy*, pp.85ff.

Going beyond sermons, a number of essays and chapters in books (other than *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, of course) also pick up this theme. A key chapter in *Faith and History* is entitled "The Foolishness of the Cross and the Sense of History"⁹⁶ and the concluding chapter to *The Self and the Dramas of History* on "Individual and Collective Destinies" deals with the meaning of the Cross.⁹⁷ A large number of Niebuhr's journal contributions also dwell on the theme of the Cross, but none quite as significant as Niebuhr's first editorial for the new journal, *Christianity and Crisis* which in laying out his central presuppositions dwells at length on the Atonement.⁹⁸

In this section we have sought to establish the centrality of the doctrine of the Atonement in Niebuhr's thought. We have thus seen how important the theme of redemption was for him, as well as how he returned again and again to the Cross and its significance. We have also seen him express in his own words the significance of this doctrine. We close with Niebuhr's own estimation of the doctrine.

The Christian doctrine of the Atonement is therefore not some incomprehensible remnant of superstition, nor yet a completely incomprehensible article of faith. It is, indeed, on the other side of human wisdom, in the sense that it is not comprehensible to a wisdom which looks at the world with confident eyes, certain that all its mysteries can be fathomed by the human mind. Yet it is the beginning of wisdom in the sense that it contains symbolically all that the Christian faith maintains about what man ought to do and what he cannot do, about his obligations and final incapacity to fulfill them, about the

⁹⁶ *Faith and History*, pp.139ff.

⁹⁷ *The Self and the Dramas of History*, especially p.232.

⁹⁸ See *Love and Justice*, D.B. Robertson, (Ed.). (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), pp.279ff.

importance of decisions and achievements in history and about their final insignificance.⁹⁹

1.6. Niebuhr's Theological Method: Experience, Polemics and Faith.

In our defense of the centrality of soteriology in Niebuhr's ethics, we were ready to admit that there are contrasting positions. That there should be so much confusion on the relationship of theology to ethics, a central theme in Niebuhr, suggests that we need to be clear on Niebuhr's theological method before we proceed further.

Perhaps the most helpful way to understand Niebuhr's method is to recognize his involvement in what Juan Luis Segundo calls the hermeneutical circle.¹⁰⁰ Segundo speaks of four decisive factors in this circle:

Firstly there is our way of experiencing reality, which leads us to ideological suspicion. *Secondly* there is the application of our ideological suspicion to the whole ideological superstructure in general and to theology in particular. *Thirdly* there comes a new way of experiencing theological reality that leads us to exegetical suspicion, that is, to the suspicion that the prevailing interpretation of the Bible has not taken important pieces of data into account. *Fourthly* we have our new hermeneutic, that is, our new way of interpreting the fountainhead of our faith (i.e. Scripture) with the new elements at our disposal.¹⁰¹

Those familiar with Niebuhr's thought would recognize these factors in his theological method. For example, the

⁹⁹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man* Vol II, p.212.

¹⁰⁰ Georges Casalis uses the term "Hermeneutical Circulation" which I prefer in *Correct Ideas Don't Fall from the Skies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), p.68.

¹⁰¹ Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976), p.9. Segundo has a chapter devoted to the circle. See also J. Severino Croatto, *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom* (Maryknoll, Orbis, 1981); J. Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (London: SPCK, 1975).

experience in Detroit in the 1920's led him to an ideological suspicion about liberal Protestantism, and drove him to new interpretations of the Scriptures and the faith.

Reflecting upon this, he writes:

such theological convictions which I hold today began to dawn upon me during the end of a pastorate in a great industrial city. They dawned upon me because the simple little moral homilies which were preached in that as in other cities, by myself and others, seemed completely irrelevant to the brutal facts of life in a great industrial centre.¹⁰²

The pattern continued throughout his life, as he was stimulated into reflection by world-events: the First and Second World Wars, the Depression, the Cold War, Racism in the U.S.A., the Palestinian-Israeli question, etc. Rasmussen has written:

With an acute historical consciousness, and a feeling for the imprint of events, he would simply raid theology to help discern "the signs of the times" and move everyone he could into a committed response to those events. Niebuhr consistently travelled a methodological circle, employing Christian symbols to illuminate the human drama that fascinated him, and then revising the articulation of those symbols in the light of the drama as it unfolded. He let faith discern the truth of his experience and at the same time let the reality of human experience be his guide to theology.¹⁰³

Ronald Stone evaluates Niebuhr's method in similar terms, showing the hermeneutical circularity between faith and politics:

His major interests were not in theological problems per se, but rather in the social and ethical functions of religion. He deals with the symbols of theology as they affect the formulation of an adequate doctrine of man on the development of political thought. He believed so deeply in

¹⁰² "Ten Years that Shook my World" in *The Christian Century*, Vol 56, April 26, 1939. p.545.

¹⁰³ Larry Rasmussen (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.2.

the social relevance of religion that he did not hesitate to demythologize and reformulate the Christian tradition to meet human problems of the modern world. His utilization of symbols combines a loyalty to the tradition with a concern for the ethical and pedagogical integrity of the tradition.¹⁰⁴

The priority of his search for ethical responsibility rather than for the "Christian way" or for "the truth" is what gives to Niebuhr's theological method this particular character. For it is a method that starts with the world and experience, and then moves to dialogue with the religious and secular worldviews, and the Christian faith as expressed in the Bible and the tradition. In contemporary terms, one would say that Niebuhr's theology begins in social analysis or, perhaps more accurately, in psycho-social analysis.

"Niebuhr's own movement had been from practice through ethics toward theology", writes Martin Marty,¹⁰⁵ and Gabriel Fackre has identified these three important elements in Niebuhr's "way of doing theology":

- a. Reflection in the context of involvement;
- b. The secular dialogue;
- c. The Christian story.¹⁰⁶

One of the implications that this has for Niebuhr's theology is that it is very contextual. Tillich once said of him, "if somebody was *en kairo* then it was Niebuhr in the thirties of this century",¹⁰⁷ and we are well advised then to always understand his thought *en kairo*, in its historical

¹⁰⁴ Ronald Stone, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), p.242.

¹⁰⁵ Martin Marty, "Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience" in N.A. Scott, Jr. (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.15.

¹⁰⁶ These are the headings of a discussion on Niebuhr's method. Gabriel Fackre, *op. cit.*, pp.92f.

¹⁰⁷ Discussion following Paul Tillich's paper in H.R. Landon (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.51.

context "for to do otherwise", comments Michael Link, "is to invite confusion, if not intellectual disaster".¹⁰⁸ In so far as we have chosen to treat his work typologically in this thesis, we are under obligation to keep his contextual method of doing theology as a critical principle.

For Niebuhr, faith, experience, dialogue, social analysis and engagement were all significant parts of his theological method. Thus McAfee Brown can speak of the two sources of Niebuhr's theological writings as follows:

(1) the particular heritage of the Christian faith that he had appropriated, drawing especially on the Hebrew prophets, Jesus, Paul, the Reformers and Kierkegaard; and (2) a viewpoint in scrutinizing the world around him not only in the light of this faith, but also with the tools of social science, political philosophy, and history that he acquired during his adult life.¹⁰⁹

In this dialectic between faith and analyzed experience both elements were important. We shall return below to the significance of the "faith" side, and deal for a moment with analyzed experience. For Niebuhr, all calls to responsible ethics, including the Christian faith, had to make sense of the "signs of the times", and stand up to the "facts of history". Niebuhr's sense of faith, writes McCann

was not some dogmatic absolute removed from the vicissitudes of history. As he later came to recognize, it was related in a "circular" fashion to "the facts of experience". Thus what he knew personally as the "truth" of his experience had to be trusted as the guide to theology.¹¹⁰

We can now identify three clear elements in Niebuhr's theological method: (i) an analysis of the "facts of

¹⁰⁸ Michael Link, *The Social Philosophy of Reinhold Niebuhr*. (Chicago: Adams Press, 1975), p.ii.

¹⁰⁹ Robert McAfee Brown, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, p.xiii

¹¹⁰ Dennis P. McCann, *op. cit.*, p.13.

history"; (ii) a critique of worldviews which do not provide an adequate framework to interpret these facts; and (iii) an assertion of the abiding truth of an interpretation of the Christian faith. We examine the importance of each in turn.

A. *The facts of history.* Niebuhr was critical of those who sought to deal "scientifically" with human experience and behaviour. This was not because he undervalued the facts of experience, but precisely because he felt such analysis so often obscured some of the important facts. He writes:

The radical freedom of the self and the consequent dramatic realities of history are naturally embarrassing to any scientific effort, either to understand or to master history. There is a consequent tendency in the psychological and social sciences to suppress these inconvenient facts about man, and to emphasize the various facts which "determine" his action and destinies.¹¹¹

Thus, Niebuhr sees a tension between the two connotations of "scientific": rational coherence, and "humility before the facts". In the search for rational coherence, some facts which cannot fit the system are ignored. Niebuhr makes it clear that he values "humility before the facts" above rational coherence.¹¹² This "humility before the facts", writes Veldhuis,

is the first tenet of his theoretical credo. Our thought has to recognize all known facts, even when they cannot be fitted into one consistent system.¹¹³

The "facts of history" are thus the touchstone of any adequate attempt to interpret the world. "Reinhold Niebuhr considered history the most important secular discipline"

¹¹¹ *The Self and the Dramas of History*, p.49.

¹¹² See *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, pp.5f.

¹¹³ Ruurd Veldhuis, *op. cit.*, p.10.

writes Michael Link. "For him, ideas had to be tested against the facts of history. This testing by reference to history formed the foundation of Niebuhr's empiricism."¹¹⁴ No attempt to interpret the world and provide a responsible ethic could sacrifice the facts.

What Ronald Stone has written about *The Nature and Destiny of Man* is thus true of all of Niebuhr's theology:

Theology and political analysis are intimately related in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Like most of Niebuhr's systematic writing, this volume is oriented to the history of ideas. The adequacy of the ideas is judged by the degree of their correspondence to Niebuhr's understanding of the relevant social facts. Theological conceptions as well as political principles are judged by reference to their adequacy in comprehending man's social life.¹¹⁵

And he quotes in agreement Theodore Gill's evaluation of Niebuhr's theological method:

There can be little doubt that the method proceeds more from the observation of social data to the recognition of theological conclusions than vice versa.¹¹⁶

B. Critique of other worldviews. Niebuhr's thinking was characterized by a critique of other worldviews. He seldom set forth his own perspective without contrasting it with what he considered to be other inadequate perspectives. We have already had occasion to note this in his critique of other worldviews from the perspective of redemption. Paul Tillich calls it the "critical-comparing method",¹¹⁷ and Kenneth Durkin terms it "negative validation".¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Michael Link, *op. cit.*, pp.124f.

¹¹⁵ Ronald Stone, *op. cit.*, p.93.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.93.

¹¹⁷ Tillich illustrates it like this: "He quotes a passage of Paul, and then in opposition to it a passage of Plato, or of Spinoza, or even worse, of Hegel; and then he says: "Now here you have the Biblical truth

This is perhaps most clear in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* where he has a detailed analysis of the "Classical" and "Modern" views on human nature and destiny alongside the "Christian" view. This involves him in dialogue with Rationalism, Romanticism, Marxism, Idealism, the Lutheran and Calvinist Reformation, Roman Catholicism, and a number of other Christian and secular points of view.

While it is most clear in this book, this "critical-comparing method" method is used throughout Niebuhr's writings. *Moral Man and Immoral Society* involves a discussion of Liberal and Marxist understandings of society, *Faith and History* is sub-titled "a Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History", and *The Self and the Dramas of History* involves sustained dialogue with competing philosophical and psychological understandings of the self. Many of Niebuhr's shorter articles and contributions to magazines are ongoing dialogues and debates with other people and perspectives such as Billy Graham, Karl Barth, the *Christian Century*, the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, Communists and Liberal Christians, to name a few.

Niebuhr's method reminds one of many of the Christian Apologists and Church Fathers of the first centuries of the church. And with them, he shares the characteristic of mentioning his opponents' thinking with a view to establishing his own point over and against them, rather

and there you have the philosophical error." Paul Tillich, "Sin and Grace in the Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr" in H.R. Landon (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.33.

¹¹⁸ Kenneth Durkin, *op. cit.*, p.176.

than in being a faithful and slavish recorder of these views. This is picked up by Richard Fox and Stanley Hauerwas in the following exchange. Fox says of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* that it is

not so much a playground of ideas as a shooting gallery in which the Renaissance and the Greeks and other rationalists are the ducks. It's a mythmaking volume."

"It is!" Hauerwas exclaimed, enthusiastically reinforcing Fox's point. "It is! It's a re-mythologization. Some people always criticize Niebuhr for his lack of historical accuracy about the Renaissance and so on, but I don't think he was concerned with that. For Niebuhr, the Renaissance symbolizes a whole set of eternal human possibilities. He knows there's more ambiguity than he's indicating. Nevertheless, he builds a shooting gallery, He wants to shoot down the targets, but he wants to keep them around too.¹¹⁹

With a different metaphor, William Wolf makes the same point:

Niebuhr has been painting with a very broad brush on the canvas of Western cultural history. It is little wonder that specialists within some of these periods point out over-generalizations, if not some historical inaccuracies.¹²⁰

In other words, one reads Niebuhr's arguments about a worldview not so much to gain a sympathetic interpretation of that particular worldview, but rather to gain a deeper understanding of Niebuhr's own thinking.

John Flynn comments, "Niebuhr's own thought is best revealed in his criticism of other positions",¹²¹ and

¹¹⁹ In Paul T. Stallsworth (Ed.), "The Story of an Encounter" in *Reinhold Niebuhr Today*. *Op. cit.*, p.106.

¹²⁰ William John Wolf, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.311. Kenneth Durkin makes a similar point: "This exercise often involves an oversimplification of the system in question, and it is not difficult for people with knowledge in these areas to criticize the representation of the area." Kenneth Durkin, *op. cit.*, p.176.

¹²¹ John L. Flynn, *op. cit.*, p.17.

commenting upon his critique of liberalism, Ruurd Veldhuis argues "we are not so much interested in liberalism for its own sake at this point, but primarily in Niebuhr's own views as they are reflected in his critique of Liberalism".¹²² In our case we might add that the critique of other worldviews on the theme of redemption is thus a key pointer to the centrality of soteriology in his own thought. John Bennett makes the same point as Flynn and Veldhuis:

So much of Niebuhr's writing is polemical that he cannot usually be understood unless what he says is interpreted in the light of the position which he is attempting to correct. Very often he overcorrects, and his own real emphasis will then be seen by comparing his polemics against one position with those against the opposite position.¹²³

We should recognize that the same polemical method used against secular worldviews is also used against other Christian traditions. James Gustafson argues:

Indeed, I think one can make a case that Niebuhr came to his interpretation and use of crucial Christian myths and doctrines through his polemics against other uses of them (eg. Protestant liberalism and Protestant orthodoxy) by assessing the moral and social consequences of other views.¹²⁴

It needs to be said that Niebuhr did not willfully set out to misrepresent any worldview. Reflecting upon his polemical method, later in life, he said:

¹²² Ruurd Veldhuis, *op. cit.*, p.74. Earlier he writes, "Niebuhr was a highly polemical thinker who stated his own views most of the time by criticizing others. It could be defended that historically the negative aspects of his work have been more important than his positive views..." p.72.

¹²³ John Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethics" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.110f.

¹²⁴ James Gustafson, "Theology in the Service of Ethics: An Interpretation of Reinhold Niebuhr's Theological Ethics" in R. Harries (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.36f.

I don't reject the previous positions that I took on these questions, but I do reject my polemical attitude of the past. Yet there is always a place for honest speaking, and I hope that I have tried to be as honest as possible even in my polemical days.¹²⁵

And to his benefit, his long-time friend and colleague, John Bennett remarked, "Of course, the Niebuhr that one knows around the corridors and the elevator is always more qualified than the Niebuhr that writes publicly".¹²⁶

C. *The abiding truth of the Christian faith.* The overriding theme of this "critical-comparing method" is intrinsically linked to the first element in Niebuhr's method to do with the "facts of history", and leads on to the third element to do with the truth of the Christian faith.

Niebuhr is constantly asking of every worldview, including the various Christian traditions, albeit in his polemical fashion, "does this explain and illuminate our experience?", and "does this fit with the facts of history?"

In *The Self and the Dramas of History*, he asks the over-arching question:

How, in other words, can we bring the whole human story, including all the relevant and irrelevant individual dramas, into some scheme of intelligibility without obscuring and denying the richness of the drama?¹²⁷

and he answers:

The systems proposed by classical or modern philosophers or scientists invariably deny or obscure some directly experienced facts for the sake of the coherence of the system.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Interview with Reinhold Niebuhr in Patrick Granfield, *Theologians at Work*. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1967), p.55.

¹²⁶ Discussion following the paper of John Bennett in H.R. Landon (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.88f.

¹²⁷ *The Self and the Dramas of History*, p.239.

¹²⁸ *The Self and the Dramas of History*, p.240.

For Niebuhr, it is the failure of these worldviews to explain the "facts" of life that make them false, rather than that they disagree with some pre-conceived "Christian truth". "Whatever measure of Christian faith I hold today" he wrote in 1939, "is due to the gradual exclusion of alternative beliefs in world history".¹²⁹

The way in which Niebuhr came to relate the abiding truth of the Christian faith to the "facts of history" so as to make the rich drama of human life intelligible, was through what Dennis McCann has called his "mythical method".¹³⁰ Niebuhr began to work with the concept of myth in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*¹³¹, and then in the essay, "As Deceivers, Yet True" in *Beyond Tragedy* he identifies what for him are the important myths of the Christian faith: Creation, Fall, Atonement, and Parousia.¹³²

In this essay he writes:

The Christian religion may be characterized as one which has transmuted primitive religious and artistic myths and symbols without fully rationalizing them... Every Christian myth, in one way or another, expresses both the meaningfulness and the incompleteness of the temporal world, both the majesty of God and his relation to the world.¹³³

The point about myths for Niebuhr is that they enable him to articulate the abiding truth and meaning of the

129 "Ten years that shook my world" in *The Christian Century*, Vol 56, April 26, 1939. p.546.

130 See Dennis McCann, *op. cit.*, pp.37ff.

131 See his discussion on pp.22ff.

132 The essay works around these four themes. Thus, "we are deceivers, yet true, when we say that God created the world" (p.7); "we are deceivers, yet true, when we say that man fell into evil" (p.10); "we are deceivers, yet true, when we affirm that God became man to redeem the world from sin" (p.13); and "we are deceivers, yet true, when we declare that Christ will come again at the last judgement..." (p.21).

133 "Deceivers, Yet True" in *Beyond Tragedy*, p.7.

Christian faith while avoiding the problems and debates surrounding the claims of literal truth. For Niebuhr, says Gordon Harland, "meaning is set in the context of Mystery".¹³⁴ In a later essay dealing with this issue of meaning in the Christian faith, Niebuhr writes:

In short, the situation is that the ultrarational pinnacles of Christian truth, embodying paradox and contradiction and straining at the limits of rationality, are made plausible when understood as the keys which make the drama of human life and history comprehensible and without which it is either given a too-simple meaning or falls into meaninglessness.¹³⁵

This use of the significant Christian myths as "keys" through which to comprehend human life and history was explored most supremely in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. "This book", writes Kenneth Durkin, "marks a culmination of his work in the 1930's in that it gives substance to the ultra-rational framework and interprets reality on the basis of the primary Christian mythology."¹³⁶ Durkin sees the same approach at work also in *The Self and the Dramas of History*.¹³⁷ Dennis McCann sums up this aspect of Niebuhr's method in this manner:

The question of a "mythical method" of interpretation, therefore, was always premised on this concern for religious "truth" and its availability. If "the aesthetic motif in religion" were to have political relevance, it

¹³⁴ Gordon Harland, *Op. cit.*, p.113.

¹³⁵ "Coherence, Incoherence and Christian Faith" in *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p.185.

¹³⁶ Kenneth Durkin, *op. cit.*, p.100. Durkin's analysis takes Niebuhr's "mythical method" seriously. In evaluation he writes: "The one constant feature of Niebuhr's work is the theme that all knowledge must be situated in an ultra-rational framework. As his work developed he insisted that the primary myths of biblical religion, Creation, Fall, Atonement, and Parousia, provided the substance for this ultra-rational framework." p.175.

¹³⁷ "The primary myths function as a a kind of database into which Niebuhr's latest reading is fed in and categorized." *Op. cit.*, p.165.

could not remain encapsulated in Niebuhr's personal sensibilities. Some way had to be found to dramatize its meaning and give it theological plausibility. This is what Niebuhr intended by the "mythical method".¹³⁸

We see then that Niebuhr does theology very self-consciously in dialogue with human experience, seeking the adequacy of various worldviews, rejecting them for not dealing with the "facts" and finally showing how the Christian tradition in the form of its great myths provides the best framework for understanding and interpreting the "facts" of history and human experience.

It is Niebuhr's willingness to begin his theological reflections with the "facts of history" that incline some people to assume he is grounding his theology and his ethics in *human nature*. From everything that has been said, there can be no doubt that an analysis of human nature is significant for Niebuhr's theology, but in our opinion this view results from a confusion of theological method and theological content.

In terms of *method*, Niebuhr is most at ease when he begins with the facts of history, facts which obviously have to do with *human nature*. In terms of *content*, however, we need to return to the dialectic between faith and experience that our discussion of his method began with, and state that for all his openness to "facts" and "experience", Niebuhr comes to discern the signs of the times from a confessional perspective. He is a committed Christian preacher with a prior "faith commitment". It is his considered opinion that the classic Christian tradition with its understanding of

¹³⁸ Dennis McCann, *op. cit.*, p.50.

creation, anthropology, sin, grace and redemption offers the most compelling analysis of human experience and challenge to ethical action, and that only from the basis of revealed faith can the truth about history and experience be fully understood.

Niebuhr articulates this in his discussion on the relationship of the wisdom of the world to the wisdom of faith in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II. In the first volume, Niebuhr had given theoretical and theological support to his openness to moral and rational insight within all culture through his defence of the presence of a *justitia originalis* in human nature.¹³⁹ Human reflection upon the "facts of history" is therefore able to discern some truth.

Niebuhr speaks of a three-fold relationship of this revealed wisdom to the wisdom of the world, which both affirms the significance of natural wisdom and finally negates it. This word of revelation (i) completes incomplete knowledge, (ii) clarifies obscurities and contradictions, and (iii) corrects falsifications. In the latter sense "the word of revelation stands in contradiction to human culture and is 'foolishness' to the wise".¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Niebuhr's most comprehensive reflections on *justitia originalis* are found in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I chapter 10. Referring to this chapter in the second volume he writes: "Neither the finiteness of the human mind nor the sinful corruption of the mind or the "ideological taint" in all human culture can completely efface the human capacity for the apprehension of the true wisdom. Since there can be no total corruption of truth or virtue there is always a residual desire for the true wisdom, and the real God and the final revelation of the meaning of life, below and above the sinful tendency to build a world of meaning around ourselves as the centre." *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.63.

¹⁴⁰ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.67.

The truth which is revealed in the Cross is not a truth which could have been anticipated in human culture and it is not the culmination of human wisdom. The true Christ is not expected.¹⁴¹

He does immediately go on to defend his dialectic of faith and experience:

on the other hand a truth of faith is not something which stands perpetually in contradiction to experience. On the contrary it illumines experience and is in turn validated by experience.¹⁴²

Nevertheless, the point is made. Though faith must be in constant dialogue with experience, the truth about life comes from the revelation of the Cross of Christ, and is thereafter validated by experience.

Thus we can maintain that although *in terms of method* Niebuhr begins his theology with a reflection upon experience and the facts of history, there is, *in terms of content*, a clear faith commitment which precedes this reflection. This faith commitment gives rise to the passion for a responsible ethic, and locates it in the framework of *human destiny* informed by the saving work of Christ.

We are therefore justified in maintaining that while it may seem methodologically that Niebuhr's ethics arise out of his discussion on *human nature* and therefore anthropology, it is rather his reflections on *human destiny* in the light of the Cross of Christ, and therefore soteriology, which is determinative.

¹⁴¹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.62.

¹⁴² *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.63.

1.7. The Terms of the Debate: Liberation and Justice.

We have argued that Niebuhr's ethics are best understood as flowing out of his reflections upon *human destiny*, and therefore that *soteriology* provides a key for interpreting his ethics that is both creative and true to Niebuhr.

Further, we have seen that Niebuhr's method involved the three elements of accountability to the facts of history, polemical dialogue with alternative worldviews, and a commitment to the Christian faith. These three elements provide us with the framework for the rest of this thesis.

If Niebuhr approached ethics from the perspective of soteriology then it should be possible to show that the world views he rejected in his polemical dialogue were rejected precisely because they were false doctrines of salvation. That this can be shown to be the case considerably strengthens our argument about the relationship of soteriology to ethics.

It was not just that the other worldviews misunderstood the facts of history that concerned Niebuhr and brought forth the torrent of polemical criticism, but rather that in so doing, they misunderstood the possibilities for political ethics. Langdon Gilkey writes concerning Niebuhr's method:

Therefore one main criterion of theological validity is not only an interpretation's adequacy to the "facts" of social existence and to biblical symbolism but even more its effectiveness in initiating, in fact requiring, creative and transformative political action for larger justice, equality, and peace.¹⁴³

¹⁴³ Langdon Gilkey, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology of History" in N.A. Scott, Jr. (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.37.

If political ethics arise out of an understanding of human destiny informed by soteriology then the relationship of salvation or redemption¹⁴⁴ to history becomes important to clarify. It should come as no surprise then, as we have noted above, that this is the central theme to which Niebuhr returns time and again in his criticisms of the worldviews.

The most common theme with which he works in exploring the relationship of salvation to history is a difference between "utopia" and "realism". These two terms are helpful to a point, but obscure some of the issues at stake. We are persuaded, rather, to categorize the difference between the relationship of history to the false doctrines of redemption - what we shall call the false soteriologies - on the one hand, and true salvation on the other hand, as a difference between the search for liberation and the practice of justice.

Reflecting on Niebuhr's theology of the Cross, Douglas Hall likewise identifies these two tendencies though using the phrases "salvation as resolution" and "salvation as engagement":¹⁴⁵

The difference between *theologia gloriae* and *theologia crucis*, is the difference between salvation as resolution and salvation as engagement. A theological triumphalism which posits salvation as a *fait accompli* does not necessarily preclude ethics; it may produce a perfectionist ethic or an ethical passivity, depending upon whether its orientation is towards this world or "the next". But salvation interpreted as the dynamic influence of grace in the ongoing struggles of history leads necessarily to an ethic that is not merely consequential but

¹⁴⁴ As indicated above, the two terms are synonymous for us.

¹⁴⁵ I am not suggesting that Hall agrees with my terms which were chosen prior to reading his essay, but rather that there is a deep similarity in our perception about salvation and ethics in Niebuhr's thought.

and integral dimension of the core of the Gospel itself.¹⁴⁶

The false soteriologies, seeking salvation without the Cross of Christ, (*theologia gloriae*) proclaim salvation as resolution. In political terms, salvation as "liberation".¹⁴⁷ Hall notes that this resolution can be oriented either to "this world" or "the next", and this is exactly what we find in the false soteriologies that Niebuhr criticizes. These false soteriologies that see salvation as liberation we shall term the *denial* of history, the *worship* of history, and the *completing* of history. The analysis of these false soteriologies is the focus of our second chapter.

The true soteriology, seeking salvation through the Cross of Christ, (*theologia crucis*) proclaims salvation as engagement. In political terms, salvation as the search for justice. This is the position that Niebuhr took, and his articulation of this abiding truth of the Christian faith in the light of the facts of history is the focus of our third chapter. The final chapter is devoted to an evaluation of Niebuhr's position that while affirming him, seeks to develop a more adequate articulation of the relationship of soteriology and justice.

¹⁴⁶ Douglas Hall, "The Cross and Contemporary Culture" in R. Harries (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.198.

¹⁴⁷ The use of the word liberation may dismay some people, but I think that it is the correct term. I have made some comments on the concept of liberation in the introduction to this thesis that should help to indicate my use of the word. The critique is not intended to undermine liberation struggles against injustice, oppression, and exploitation, as should be clear from my final chapter, and my affirmation of justice. It is rather an internal critique asking whether in the end the concept of liberation really can provide us with a coherent and responsible political ethic.

CHAPTER TWO. REDEMPTION AS LIBERATION: THE FALSE SOTERIOLOGIES.

2.1. The Three Types of False Redemption.

From a confessional perspective, Niebuhr used his critique of other worldviews to clarify the significant facts of history and establish the truth of the Christian faith. This chapter deals with the critique of the various worldviews.

We have noted the centrality of soteriology for Niebuhr: how he turns to the question of salvation or redemption when seeking to understand society, and to analyze and critique other worldviews. We noted how he at certain stages referred to two of the most important of these worldviews as "creeds of world redemption".¹ In getting to the heart of Niebuhr's own thinking about redemption and to his understanding of the doctrine of the Atonement it is helpful to begin with his critique of these "creeds of redemption". We shall thus consider them as false doctrines of salvation or *false soteriologies*.

Owing to his polemical method, Niebuhr was fond of using over-arching themes or types to provide a frame-work in which to discuss and analyze other worldviews. Daniel D. Williams puts it like this:

He views the history of human thought as exhibiting a series of "types" of outlook. He arranges these according to certain key concepts

¹ *Faith and History*, p.84. In "Two Forms of Utopianism", Niebuhr refers to them as "two secular religions of world redemption", *op. cit.*, p.6.

and problems in which he is interested.... Thus Niebuhr is not so much concerned to trace nuances of meaning in different philosophies, or to work out the complex lines of historical development. He is rather an apologist and critic who tries to get directly at the basic principles by which various faiths grasp the meaning of life.... Though the method produces a considerable oversimplification, it permits the discovery and concise statement of fundamental issues.²

In *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, for example, he uses the distinction between worldviews or cultures "where a Christ is not expected" and those "where a Christ is expected".³ Soon after this he categorized various worldviews as being of "the children of the light" and of "the children of the dark".⁴ Perhaps his most enduring categorization is that of "soft utopianism" and "hard utopianism".⁵ In *Faith and History*, Niebuhr uses this distinction to analyze a whole range of worldviews, grouping them together because of their similar perspective on history and redemption, i.e. their soteriology.⁶

As just illustrated Niebuhr tends, in a given situation and for rhetorical reasons, to work with a contrast between two types. It is our contention, however, that an adequate typology of the world views seen from the perspective of soteriology must consider three types, and that the titles of these types are not ones actually used by Niebuhr, but are implicit in and suggested by his reflections through all his writing.

² Daniel D. Williams, "Niebuhr and Liberalism" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.271.

³ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II. pp.6ff; 15ff.

⁴ See his book, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, and the definition on p.9.

⁵ See the first mention of this in "Two Forms of Utopianism", *op. cit.*, pp.6,7.

⁶ See *Faith and History*, pp.206ff.

These are:

1. The *denial* of history;
2. The *worship* of history; and
3. The *completing* of history.

Throughout Niebuhr's thought there is a contrast between those worldviews that take history seriously and those that do not, worldviews "where a Christ is expected", and those "where a Christ is not expected". Our first type, the *denial* of history is suggested by this distinction. This distinction aside, within those worldviews that take history seriously Niebuhr saw a distinction between those that believe history will usher in perfection, and those who believe it already has, a distinction between the "soft utopians" and the "hard utopians". This distinction suggests our types of the *worship* of history and the *completing* of history, respectively.

The types are roughly analogous, therefore, to (i) "where a Christ is not expected"; (ii) "where a Christ is expected" in the form of "soft utopianism"; and (iii) "where a Christ is expected" in the form of "hard utopianism".

Using the relationship of *grace to power* as an evaluative category - which is not unrelated to our soteriological concern - Theodore Minnema has identified a similar tri-partite division in the traditions Niebuhr discussed:

They all have misconstrued the character of power in terms of the dialectical framework of history. In their various interpretations the tension of the dialectic was either severed by raising history as an immanent self-developing order (Renaissance), or certain forces in history (Roman Catholicism and Calvinism), to an unchallengeable position above judgement, or conversely, by negating the whole historical order (Lutheranism)

so that ethical urgency in the social situation was nullified.⁷

With the exception of Calvinism, we would express broad agreement with Minnema's division: the Renaissance symbolizing for us the *worship of history* ("history as an immanent self-developing order"), Roman Catholicism the *completing of history* ("certain forces in history to an unchallengeable position above judgement"), and Lutheranism the *denial of history* ("negating the whole historical order").

Something of this tri-partite division is reflected by Niebuhr himself in the 1963 preface to *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. He writes:

The effort to discern meaning in all the confusions and cross purposes of history distinguishes Western culture and imparts historical dynamic to its striving. It must be distinguished from all religions, mystical or rationalistic, which equate "salvation" with flight from the confusions and responsibilities of man's historic existence.

But Western culture has paid for this boon of historical dynamic with two evils inhering in the historical emphasis. One is the evil of fanaticism, the consequence of giving ultimate significance to historically contingent goals and values. The others is the creative, but also confusing, Messianism, the hope for heaven on earth, for a kingdom of universal peace and righteousness.⁸

We shall presently be exploring the differences between the three false soteriologies and not only between the types, but even within the worldviews that represent the various types. Yet for all the differences in Niebuhr's thought there is an underlying unity that sets them apart and

⁷ Theodore Minnema, *op. cit.*, p.81.

⁸ "Preface for the Scribner Library Edition", *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, p.viii.

distinguishes them from the one true soteriology: The relationship of redemption to history, i.e. human destiny, is conceived of as "liberation".

Niebuhr did not use the word in this way himself, nevertheless, we believe it best expresses the heart of the relationship of redemption to history in the false soteriologies.

As we have previously noted in reference to Douglas Hall, for Niebuhr the false soteriology arising out of a *theologia gloriae*, and against which he argued, is "salvation as resolution".⁹ In a similar vein, Edward Carnell has written:

This is the pith of the matter: If the distinctiveness of dialectical religion consists in the exclusion of any level on which freedom may enjoy an easy conscience, non dialectical distinctiveness consists in its inclusion.¹⁰

It is this sense of "salvation as resolution", or the inclusion of a level in which "freedom may enjoin an easy conscience" that we are seeking to describe by the word "liberation". Furthermore, as Hall saw that "resolution" could be oriented towards "this world or the next", Carnell argues that this desire for freedom with an easy conscience manifests itself in other-worldliness and this-worldliness.¹¹ Therefore, even though one of the false soteriologies explicitly denies salvation in history we are justified in seeing "liberation" as the overarching theme for all three false soteriologies.

⁹ Douglas Hall, "The Cross and Contemporary Culture" in R. Harries (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.198. See our discussion in chapter 1.7.

¹⁰ Edward John Carnell, "Niebuhr's Criteria of Verification" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.458.

¹¹ See his discussion in *Ibid.*, pp.458f.

In the *denial* of history, redemption is conceived of as a *liberation from history*; in the other two types, redemption is conceived of *in history* either as a *future possibility*, as in the *worship of history*, or as a *present accomplishment*, as in the *completing of history*.

We are dealing here with a typology to understand Niebuhr's thought.¹² Furthermore it is a typology that Niebuhr did not use himself. Three warnings are therefore necessary.

First, a typological reading will often minimize the changes and developments in Niebuhr's thought. Ronald Stone has written:

Too often the chronological development of his thought has not been taken seriously enough. Niebuhr's thought altered significantly through more than half a century of writing, and no interpretation of his thought can neglect the chronology and remain accurate.¹³

This is undoubtedly true. Niebuhr was *en kairo*. Yet while we must understand Niebuhr's thought *en kairo*, he seldom sought to understand other worldviews *en kairo*.¹⁴ We have noted the polemical nature of his thought, and insofar as he himself approached other worldviews typologically there is something to be said for approaching his thought typologically. Indeed, it helps us understand some otherwise confusing elements in his thought - such as his

¹² Due to this typological approach, we will identify the various worldviews with capital letters, even though Niebuhr himself did not always use capitals in this way himself.

¹³ Ronald Stone, *op. cit.*, p.8.

¹⁴ Again it is Tillich who makes the point: "Here you see one very interesting point in which I understood why I never was satisfied with Niebuhr's treatment of philosophers. They were not seen *en kairo*; they were seen only *ex contrario*, i.e. out of the opposite." Paul Tillich, "Sin and Grace in the Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr" in H.R. Landon (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.34.

continual misreading of Karl Barth, or his attack on Liberalism when he himself was in the liberal camp.

The second warning has to do with the very nature of typologies. We are categorizing divergent worldviews around a specific theme: the relationship of redemption to history, i.e. human destiny. This is the organizing principle, and it dictates which worldview belongs to which type. By this we are not suggesting any other similarity between worldviews of the same soteriological type (such as between Established Communism and Roman Catholicism for example, both representatives of the *completing* of history).

The third warning is one we have already mentioned with regards to Niebuhr's polemical method. He tended to paint with a broad brush and so was prone to generalizations. Adherents of each worldview may not recognize themselves in Niebuhr's characterization. Yet we are reminded that Niebuhr was discussing these worldviews not so much with a view to faithfully representing them, but to contrast them with the truth of the Christian faith as he saw it. It is in this spirit that they are dealt with below. This also explains why we cannot stop once we have finished this analysis of the false soteriologies, but must move on to the true doctrine of salvation.

As we analyze each type we will seek to highlight the various worldviews that Niebuhr thought characterized this tendency and deal with his critique in the light of the "facts of history". This will prepare the ground to discuss the true soteriology in the following chapter.

2.2. The Denial of History.

In *The Nature and Destiny of Man* Niebuhr writes concerning those cultures "where a Christ is not expected":

The cultures of this half of the world were non-Messianic because they were non historical. Their failure to regard history as basic to the meaning of life may be attributed to two primary methods of looking at life which stand in contradiction to each other.... the two most consistent methods of denying the meaningfulness of history are to reduce it to the proportions of nature or to regard it as a corruption of eternity.¹⁵

For Niebuhr the thought of the Classical Greeks, insofar as it does not expect a Christ, is guilty of the denial of history. In other places, however, Niebuhr characterizes three further worldviews for representing a similar perspective on the relationship of salvation to history, even though technically they may be worldviews that "expect a Christ". These are Mysticism; Naturalism, Romanticism and Fascism; and Protestant Orthodoxy.

What characterizes Niebuhr's critique of all four worldviews is not so much the question of expecting a Christ or not, but rather the conceiving of human destiny as a liberation from history, in other words, the denial of history.

2.2.1. Classical Greek Idealism

Niebuhr regarded Classical Greek thought as being one of the two determinative sources for all modern views of human nature. He notes its contribution to medieval Catholicism, to the worldviews of the Renaissance and to Liberalism,¹⁶

¹⁵ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, pp.6f. Emphasis mine.

¹⁶ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, pp.5f.

and he thus accords it some attention, especially its emphasis upon rationality:

... man is to be understood primarily from the standpoint of the uniqueness of his rational faculties. What is unique about man is his *nous*. *Nous* may be translated as "spirit" but the primary emphasis lies upon the capacity for thought and reason.¹⁷

The strong emphasis upon the mind in Classical thought gives rise to a mind-body dualism that is pervasive even in philosophies that diverge from the main-stream.¹⁸ Integral to this dualism is the notion that the body is identified with evil and the mind with virtue. The rational person is thus the good person.¹⁹

Niebuhr concentrates much of his criticism on this dualistic split between mind and body. He is unhappy with the "failure to distinguish between the self and its mind, resulting in the illusion that the true self is mind, subordinating the passions to rational control."²⁰ Niebuhr is convinced that the "facts" of human experience establish that the self is a unity of both body and mind.

This makes him sharply critical of the concomitant identification of rationality and virtue. Again, he points to the "facts" of history which indicate clearly that the rational person is not necessarily the good person, for the self can use reason for its own ends.²¹ Rationality has

¹⁷ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.6.

¹⁸ Niebuhr mentions Dionysian religion, Orphism and Pythagoreanism, and the views of Heraclitus. p.8.

¹⁹ Niebuhr sees a second, alternative perspective in Greek thought represented by Democritus and Epicurus who tended towards Naturalism and Materialism.

²⁰ *The Self and the Dramas of History*, P.76.

²¹ *The Self and the Dramas of History*, P.84.

thus been employed in the service of injustice, tyranny and evil.

This dualism and the exaltation of mind leads to a negative evaluation of the "body", and with it an antipathy towards the physical side of life, i.e. nature and history. Nature and history are so transcended by "spirit", "mind" or rationality that there is no desire to seek human destiny within history but rather by fleeing from it.

For this reason Niebuhr can characterize Classical Greco-Roman thought as a worldview in which "a Christ is not expected".²² By this he means that it denies that history has any meaning and therefore has no expectation of emancipation or redemption in history. Redemption involves the fleeing from the body into the "nous" - the mind or the spirit.

Classical idealism and mysticism in short understand the transcendent freedom of the human spirit; but they do not understand it in its organic relation to the temporal process. The natural and temporal process is merely something from which man must be emancipated. There is no yearning for fulfillment in history; there is only a desire to be freed from history".²³

This perception of the meaninglessness of history gives rise to the cyclical view of time held to by the Classical world in which there is no conception of progress or meaning in history.²⁴ Human life is caught in *tragedy* from which there is no escape, and thus "an air of melancholy hangs over Greek life".²⁵ Hence, Niebuhr often mentioned and made use of the myths of Greco-Roman religion, especially this

²² *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.7.

²³ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.11.

²⁴ See *Faith and History*, pp.38ff.

²⁵ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I p.9.

conception of tragedy to illustrate the complexities and struggles of life over and against a too optimistic perspective.²⁶

Thus, while Niebuhr is appreciative of Greek Idealism's caution about progress in history and its perception that history has a way of repeating itself, ultimately he is convinced that the "facts" show that there has been some progression in history as human necessity and creativity has led to a greater and greater taming of nature. Human beings can and must take responsible action in history.

Salvation as an escape into "spirit" or "mind", insofar as it avoids the reality of history from which the self as a unity of body and spirit cannot escape, cannot really be salvation at all. For Niebuhr then, Classical Greek Idealism in failing to understand the unity of the self fails to understand the relationship between the self and the world around it. The end result of this is that human destiny can be conceived of outside of any conception of responsible action in history. Salvation is a *denial* of history.

We should note that what emerges from this is Niebuhr's contention that human destiny must be conceived of in some responsible relationship to history.

²⁶ See for example, *Christianity and Power Politics*, pp.95ff.

2.2.2. Mysticism.

Niebuhr grouped Mysticism together with Classical Idealism in seeking to be freed from history rather than seeking fulfillment in history. Many of the same things could be said of Mysticism as have just been said of Classical Idealism, and indeed Niebuhr consistently argues that while Rationalism need not always end in Mysticism, Mysticism "is in fact the perennial overtone of rationalism".²⁷ Twenty years earlier, Niebuhr put it like this:

Mysticism is really a self devouring rationalism which begins by abstracting rational forms from concrete reality and ends by pointing an ultimate reality beyond all rational forms.²⁸

Under the heading of "Mysticism" Niebuhr dealt over a wide time-span with a broad range of thought including Buddhism,²⁹ and Hinduism,³⁰ George Santayana and Aristotle,³¹ and the Christian Mysticism of Meister Eckhardt, Jacob Boehme³² and St. John of the Cross.³³ Nevertheless, they are all subjected to the same over-riding criticism, the denial of history. In 1935 in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* he wrote concerning Mysticism:

Thus religion, seeking after the final source of life's meaning and its organizing centre, ends by destroying the meaning of life. Historic and concrete existence is robbed of its meaning because its temporal and relative forms are believed not worthy to be compared with the Absolute.³⁴

²⁷ *The Self and the Dramas of History*, p.70.

²⁸ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.34.

²⁹ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.33.

³⁰ *The Self and the Dramas of History*, p.69.

³¹ *The Self and the Dramas of History*, p.69.

³² *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.90.

³³ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II. p.93.

³⁴ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.34.

And again in 1955 in *The Self and the Dramas of History* he put it like this:

The drama of history is not comprehended by either the rationalists or the mystics.... the mystic conception of the fulfillment of meaning obviously results in the annulment of any particular meaning in history.³⁵

It is Mysticism's yearning for absorption into the absolute - or the "divine" in the case of Christian Mystics - which provides perhaps the most clear-cut case of the denial of history. Owing to his own Christian convictions it is not surprising that Niebuhr also criticizes the Christian Mystical tradition. Here he takes his criticism one step further and thus discloses part of the responsibility of what it means to take history seriously.

His criticism centres on the love command, which in Mysticism is focussed exclusively on God in the form of contemplation, and serves to draw the believer away from loving anything tainted by the sinful finitude of the world. The Christian faith, he writes,

has difficulty in preserving the Biblical conception of love against mystical and rationalistic tendencies to interpret this love in such a way that it becomes purely the love towards God and ceases to be related to brotherhood and community in history.... the mystical tradition in medieval Christianity forgets that the perfection of love revealed in Christ is relevant to history.³⁶

Niebuhr's criticism of the Christian Mystics indicates that his concern with the denial of history is not simply an intellectual disagreement but rather an *ethical criticism*. The denial of history is a denial of the relationship of

³⁵ *The Self and the Dramas of History*, pp.70f.

³⁶ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.92.

salvation and ethical responsibility (in this instance, love of neighbour).

2.2.3. Naturalism, Romanticism and Fascism.

Naturalism, Romanticism and Fascism are obviously divided on certain important points, yet Niebuhr characterizes their relationship to history in strikingly similar terms and we shall thus treat them as one worldview. Whereas Classical Idealism and Mysticism are related by the dualistic desire for human redemption through *transcending* the physical world, Niebuhr argued that Naturalism, Romanticism and Fascism all locate human destiny in the identification with nature. The result, however, is the same: the possibilities and responsibilities of human history are denied.

A. *Naturalism.* Niebuhr traces the beginning of this worldview in a second, alternative perspective in Greek thought represented by Democritus and Epicurus who tended towards Naturalism and Materialism as opposed to Rationalism and Idealism. For them the body is not seen negatively, but as the point of contact between human being and general nature.³⁷ But a strong dualism remains, and Niebuhr is adamant that Naturalism's retreat into the material world cannot do justice to the transcendence of the human spirit. He argues that the fear of death is a crucial pointer to the fact that the self is not willing to be swallowed up in the broader necessities of nature.³⁸

³⁷ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I. p.9.

³⁸ See the argument in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, pp.8ff.

Like Idealism, this dualism makes Naturalism reliant on a cyclical view of time in which there is no conception of progress or meaning in history.³⁹ In the case of Naturalism or Materialism the meaningfulness of history is denied by reducing it to nature. The human task is thus to approximate nature as closely as possible. Thus this tendency in Classical thought is also a worldview in which "a Christ is not expected".⁴⁰

While the dominant trend of the Renaissance was a reclaiming of the idealist tradition, Niebuhr argues that this Naturalist tradition was also recovered. The progress made in science certainly illustrated the power of human reason but it also illustrated the beauty and perfection of nature and human affinity with it. Insofar as the Renaissance Naturalist tradition took up this focus on human affinity to nature rather than on human transcendence over it, it retained the negative appraisal of history exhibited by the Greek Naturalists.

B. Romanticism and Fascism. As part of the protest against Rationalism, but also against the passive implications of Naturalism, Niebuhr argues that Romanticism emerges in revolt. Whereas Naturalism seeks affinity with the *peace, harmony and order* of nature, Romanticism seeks affinity with the *vitality and energy* of nature.⁴¹

³⁹ See *Faith and History*, pp.38ff.

⁴⁰ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.7.

⁴¹ See the discussion in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, pp.33ff.

Niebuhr is well aware of different strands within Romanticism.⁴² But his criticism of them all focuses on their dualism which divides human nature into two, and then in protest against the obvious failures to understand human nature from the "top half" as it were, seeks rather to do so from the "bottom half":

Its basic error lies in its effort to ascribe to the realm of the biological and the organic what is clearly a compound of nature and spirit, of biological impulse and rational and spiritual freedom. Man is never a simple two-layer affair who can be understood from the standpoint of the bottom layer, should efforts to understand him from the standpoint of the top layer fail.⁴³

While Niebuhr does trace the romantic elements within Marxism,⁴⁴ he prefers to see Fascism and Nazism as the logical heirs of Romanticism saying explicitly at one point, "the political form and tool of romanticism is fascism",⁴⁵ and elsewhere that there is "some justification" in seeing a relationship between the philosophy of German Romanticism and the creed of German Nazism.⁴⁶ These two contemporary political movements (Fascism and Nazism)⁴⁷ both draw on the idea that human nature is best understood from the perspective of vitality, (influenced in the main by Nietzsche⁴⁸ although with some changes) and that society

⁴² Indeed he argues that these conflicting tendencies within Romanticism are a good indication of its failure to adequately understand human nature and destiny. *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.39.

⁴³ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.40.

⁴⁴ See for example the discussion in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, pp.43ff.

⁴⁵ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.82. Michael Link, *op. cit.*, has the best descriptive analysis of Reinhold Niebuhr's critique of Fascism and Nazism.

⁴⁶ *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, p.34.

⁴⁷ For the best descriptive analysis of Niebuhr's ongoing criticism of Fascism and Nazism see Michael Link, *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ For Niebuhr's discussion on Nietzsche see *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, pp.34,36,39,41.

should be built around the ties of vitality in the nation, people and blood:

The romantic fascist, conscious of the element of pretension in the culture of bourgeois rationalism, dispenses with all norms and rational principles of order, insisting upon the self-justifying character of the romantic-natural order of race and blood, if only it is expressed with sufficient vitality.⁴⁹

Niebuhr's first criticism of this worldview is that it leads to a loss of individuality as the individual is swallowed up into the broader stream of nature. "Naturalistic philosophies may (and in modern nationalism do) destroy individuality by emphasizing consanguinity and other natural forces of social uniformity as the only basis of meaning".⁵⁰ Either this or individuality is swallowed in the broader expressions of vitality and will - the family, race and nation - so that "in romantic Naturalism the individuality of the person is quickly subordinated to the unique and self-justifying individuality of the social collective."⁵¹ In subjecting the individual to the nature or the social collective, the individual's freedom to make and be responsible for history is undermined.

Secondly, therefore Niebuhr argues that this worldview leads to the denial of history. We have already noted the belief in this worldview that human destiny is best found by leaving behind the monstrous human-created mess of history and returning to the simple harmonies of nature.

⁴⁹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.51.

⁵⁰ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.69.

⁵¹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.92.

Niebuhr thus understands the Fascist/Nazi outworking of the Naturalist/Romantic creed to be quite different to the one that grew out Idealism (i.e. Liberalism) on the question of progress in history. In terms of history it was not "utopian", but "cynical".

The liberal creed of progress assumes that men are progressing toward higher and higher forms of social life and more and more inclusive loyalties. The Nazi rebellion against a world community was difficult to explain in terms of this faith and was usually put down as a mysterious reversion to barbarism...⁵²

Where the harmonies of nature become instead the vitalities of nature and find expression in the political form of Fascism, then there is certainly an effect upon history, but the intention is a disavowal of creative human agency upon the world and rather the expression of the will-to-power of the race, people or nation.

The "return to nature" idea in political theories within the Romantic worldview, also indicates another aspect of the denial of history. Here the idea is that if only one could encapsulate the "natural" form of government, then life would be rid of conflict and injustice. Niebuhr is constantly critical of this kind of thinking which assumes that somehow human beings can find a form of government which is outside of history, i.e. no longer subject to the ambiguities and power struggles of historical existence.

Every effort to return by a too simple route to the harmony and harmlessness of nature inevitably results in demonic politics in which human ambitions and lusts defy the restraints of both nature and reason.⁵³

⁵² "Two Forms of Utopianism", *op. cit.*, p.6. Niebuhr uses the term "cynical" to distinguish Nazism from the "two forms of utopianism".

⁵³ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.106.

We need to recognize that while Niebuhr sees Classical Naturalism as most consistently reducing history to the exact proportions of nature, the contemporary forms of Naturalism (since the Renaissance) have been influenced by the general western consciousness of the importance of history and are therefore not so consistent in their thinking.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the tendency to deny history is there in essence:

A Christ is not expected wherever the meaning of life is explained from the standpoint of either nature or supernature in such a way that a transcendent revelation of history's meaning is not regarded as either possible or necessary. It is not regarded as possible when, as in various forms of naturalism, the visions and ambitions of historical existence which point beyond nature are regarded as illusory; and nature-history is believed to be incapable of receiving disclosures of meaning which point beyond itself.⁵⁵

For Niebuhr the lesson to be learnt is that a true understanding of the relationship of salvation to history cannot undermine the freedom that the individual has in history, and therefore deny any responsibility for making ethical decisions in history.

2.2.4. Protestant Orthodoxy.

The term "Protestant Orthodoxy" is used to describe a range of theologies arising out of the Magisterial Reformation, and includes the key figures of Luther and Calvin. This is also the category in which Niebuhr placed the Swiss theologian and Niebuhr's contemporary, Karl Barth.

⁵⁴ See the comment to this effect in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.7.

⁵⁵ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, pp.4f.

Niebuhr's critique of Protestant Orthodoxy began in earnest in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*,⁵⁶ and is followed up again in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. However, in later writings he tended to concentrate his attention and criticism upon the utopian thought of Liberalism and Communism and so tended to ignore those worldviews which he perceived had little interest in history.

For Niebuhr, Protestant Orthodoxy exhibited the same dualistic tendency we have noted in all the worldviews of this type. The basic dualism here, however, was not so much between body and spirit as between a holy God and sinful humanity. This was most clearly illustrated in the Lutheran Reformation which was so scathing of the moral pretensions of humanity in the search for righteousness.

Everything was seen against the backdrop of the human search for personal salvation and "justification by faith" that there was scant attention paid to the immediate social problems of day to day life.

The result of this, however, from Niebuhr's perspective, is that over and against the supreme contrast between the holiness of God and the sinfulness of humanity, the necessary and important relativities of (sinful) human life are relegated to the margins of human experience so that Lutheranism is "oblivious to the fact that life represents an indeterminate series of possibilities and therefore of (sic.) obligation to fulfill them."⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Though here he called it simply "Christian orthodoxy".

⁵⁷ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.190.

Its absolute distinction between the "heavenly" or "spiritual" kingdom and the "earthly" one, destroys the tension between the final demands of God upon the conscience, and all the relative possibilities of realizing the good in history.⁵⁸

Because of this indifference to immediate issues in life when seen against an overwhelmingly powerful critique of the possibilities of human "good", Protestant Orthodoxy, like Naturalism, undermined the freedom individuals have in history, and so shied away from integrating the Christian ethical demands of love and equality to specific historic situations. Thus "its insights into the ultimate problems of the human spirit frequently betray it into indifference toward the immediate problems of justice and equity in human relations":⁵⁹

Consistent Lutheranism does not permit the distinctions between relative justice and injustice, which are the very stuff of political decisions.⁶⁰

Elsewhere Niebuhr articulates this as an inability to seek a creative relationship between love, equality and justice. Love and equality were kept as pertaining to some perfect or religious "sphere" of life and not related to the world of politics and economics:

Christian Orthodoxy failed to derive any significant politico-moral principles from the law of love.... it therefore destroyed a dynamic relationship between the ideal of love and the principles of justice.⁶¹

And again:

The principle of equality was thereby robbed of its regulative function in the development of the principles of justice. It was relegated to a position of complete transcendence with the ideal

⁵⁸ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.195.

⁵⁹ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.103.

⁶⁰ *Christianity and Power Politics*, p.58.

⁶¹ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.154.

of love. The consequence was an attitude of complacency toward whatever injustices in the economic and political order had become historically established. This continues to be the baneful influence of orthodox Christianity upon political questions to this day.⁶²

Within this position in orthodox Protestantism, Niebuhr is aware of one specific instance when the church is willing to get involved in the rough and tumble of politics, and that is when the church or the "gospel" itself is under attack. But however noble this is, Niebuhr perceives it as an illustration of its pre-occupation with ultimate spiritual issues to the detriment of immediate social issues:

A church which refrains from practically every moral criticism of the state and allows itself only an ultimate religious criticism of the spiritual pretensions of the state must logically end in the plight in which the German Church finds itself.⁶³

Part of the reason for this state of affairs, argues Niebuhr, is that Protestant Orthodoxy was very suspicious of human knowledge and reason. It relied on religious truths and dogma with little or no relevance to the themes of modern society, and because of its insistence upon the authority of Scripture it often promoted ideas in the political sphere simply because they were "biblical". Niebuhr is critical of this "biblicism",⁶⁴ feeling that human reason is necessary in the task of searching for relative justice.

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the thinking of Protestant Orthodoxy about government. Rather than

⁶² *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.156.

⁶³ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.171.

⁶⁴ See for example, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.152.

seeing it as a human attempt within the bounds of the freedom of history to organize life in a particular historical setting and therefore subjecting it to the contours of the "Natural Law", the Reformation sought a "Biblical basis" for government and relied almost exclusively upon Paul's passage in Romans 13 to establish its position on Government.

The line of argument follows that we have seen above. Because of the sinfulness of people, God has ordained government as a protection against anarchy.⁶⁵ There is a very fine line, however, between seeing Government as an ordinance of God and a pious belief that a particular government is a special gift of God so that "Luther and Calvin raised religious reverence for political authority to an absurd height".⁶⁶ For Niebuhr, the fruit of this is the tendency of Protestant Orthodoxy to give up responsibility for ensuring "good" government as can be illustrated in its failure to see the danger of tyranny.

The idea that evil rulers are meant by God to be a punishment for evil people reinforced the general conservatism and the acquiescence of the Church toward unjust politics.⁶⁷

Having noted all of this, we are now in a position to affirm that for Niebuhr the problem with Protestant Orthodoxy is its *denial* of history. It is guilty of "sacrificing time and history to eternity".⁶⁸ Its failure to see that human life in history requires relative distinctions means that its avoidance of these distinctions

⁶⁵ See the argument in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, pp.164ff.

⁶⁶ *The Self and the Dramas of History*, p.173.

⁶⁷ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.169.

⁶⁸ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.151.

must lead to an avoidance of the historical task. "How else could we build history", asks Niebuhr, "except by these rigorous distinctions between good and evil, right and wrong?"⁶⁹

Referring to the German theologian Hans Assmussen, whom Niebuhr quotes as being more interested in the resurrection of the dead and life in the world to come than in an end to war and injustice and thus being the perfect illustration for Niebuhr of the folly of Protestant Orthodoxy, Niebuhr identifies the issue at stake as the "meaningfulness of history":

Here quite obviously the eschatological tension, which belongs to the Christian view of history is allowed to destroy the meaningfulness of history and to rob all historic tasks and obligations of their significance.⁷⁰

In the end, therefore, Protestant Orthodoxy is a worldview that denies history in the sense that it devalues the freedom to search for relative good in society and the relevance of love and the search for justice. Its radical emphasis on justification by faith and negation of "works", thus leads to an irresponsible attitude toward history.

For Niebuhr the result of this denial of history may be seen in the combination of defeatism,⁷¹ pessimism,⁷² quietism and passivity⁷³ that is the fruit of Protestant Orthodoxy:

⁶⁹ *Justice and Mercy*, p.55.

⁷⁰ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.196n.

⁷¹ See for example the comment in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p.76.

⁷² See for example the comment in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.156.

⁷³ See for example the comment in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.187.

The failure of Christian orthodoxy to relate the principle of equality to the law of love on the one hand and to the problems of relative justice on the other, resulted in a constant temptation to a complacent acceptance of historic forms of relative justice which ought to have been regarded, and by later ages were regarded as injustice. A perfectionist ethic thus had the tragic consequence of increasing complacency toward remediable imperfections in justice.⁷⁴

In the previous section we have noted how for Niebuhr Fascism and Nazism were also seen to deny history, and he draws the parallels between Protestant Orthodoxy and Nazi thought. In the lectures given in 1934 which make up *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* he examines the relationship of the Lutheran "Orders of Creation" to Nazi conceptions⁷⁵ and entertains the thought that "fascism is really the unfortunate fruit of Christian pessimism.... It may be that the political principles of the former are, at least partially, derived from the latter".⁷⁶ Six years later in 1940 when the full fury of Nazism was being felt he felt more secure about the relationship:

The Lutheran Reformation is therefore that particular locus in the history of Christendom where the problem of justice is most nearly disavowed. It is therefore no accident of history that Nazi pessimism, with its glorification of force as the principle of order, its unqualified affirmation of the state, its disavowal of all concepts of justice and its rejection of all universal standards of morality should grow upon this soil.⁷⁷

At this point we need to deal with Niebuhr's criticism of the Swiss theologian and his contemporary, Karl Barth.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.160.

⁷⁵ See *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, pp.161f.

⁷⁶ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.167

⁷⁷ *Christianity and Power Politics*, p.51.

⁷⁸ D.B. Robertson has collected most of Niebuhr's articles on Karl Barth in *Essays in Applied Christianity* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), pp.141ff.

There is no doubt that Niebuhr failed to understand the theology of Barth, and that he was usually mistaken in his perceptions of what Barth was saying.⁷⁹ But what is clear is that we will not understand what Niebuhr was saying to and about Barth if we do not see that according to Niebuhr's typology, Barth's theology belongs with that of Protestant Orthodoxy to the "denial of history". This is clearly indicated by Niebuhr's insistence - against all the evidence to the contrary (and remember, Niebuhr was a third generation German who could read and understand German) - that Barth is *Lutheran* in his political thinking.

In the Gifford Lectures, well after the Barmen Declaration and the understanding of the Confessing Church he must have received from his involvement in ecumenical affairs and in having Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a student, he writes that "he (Barth) has been Lutheran, at least in his general indifference towards problems of political justice", and puts his opposition to Nazism down to an emotional reaction.⁸⁰

Earlier he had written that

when Reformation theology was revived in Germany after the World War in what is now known as "dialectical theology" or Barthianism, Karl Barth actually reduced Lutheran pessimism to a new level of consistency and made it even more difficult for the Christian conscience to express itself in making the relative decisions which are so necessary for the elaborations of justice in the intricacies of politics and economics.⁸¹

⁷⁹ For a discussion on Niebuhr's relationship to Barth see Paul Merkley *op. cit.*, pp.68ff., and Ronald Stone *op. cit.*, pp.124ff.

⁸⁰ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.278.

⁸¹ *Christianity and Power Politics*, p.58.

In other words, for Niebuhr, Barth is a good contemporary illustration of what he disagreed with in Protestant Orthodoxy, and he was therefore "Lutheran". From this perspective it is much easier to understand what Niebuhr thought and said about Barth.

In *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr therefore uses Barth to illustrate his point about Protestant Orthodoxy:

Theologies, such as that of Barth, which threaten to destroy all relative moral judgements by their exclusive emphasis upon the ultimate religious fact of the sinfulness of all men, are rightly suspected of imperilling relative moral achievements of history.⁸²

For Niebuhr this is clearly illustrated in the fact that as far as he was concerned, Barth's theology did not allow for the fundamentally important distinctions between Nazism and its alternatives. And in the Cold War, Niebuhr is indignant that the "Barthian emphasis" is "content to warn western Europe that there is little to choose from between western capitalism and Russian Communism".⁸³ The last reference reminds us that Niebuhr (at the height of the Cold War) was particularly upset by Barth's failure to be as critical of Communism as he had been of Nazism. At one point he suggests that this is due to the "potent prejudices from his Marxist youth" that Barth carries.⁸⁴ But generally it is because of his theological propensity to deny the importance of making history. This is the emphasis in his review of Barth's essays collected in *Against the Stream*:

⁸² *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.220.

⁸³ "The Relevance of Reformation Doctrine in our Day" in *The Heritage of the Reformation*. E.J.F. Arndt (Ed.), (New York: R.R. Smith, 1950), p.258.

⁸⁴ *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p.48.

In short these essays reveal political naivete, posing in the guise of theological sophistication, together with a consequent incapacity to make any prudent or sensible political and moral judgements. The whole performance prompts revulsion against every pretension to derive detailed political judgements from ultimate theological positions. When a man lacks ordinary common sense in reacting against evil, no theological sophistication will help him. He may even, as Barth, think that the distinction of moment for Christians is that the Nazis tried to corrupt Christianity while communism only tries to kill it.⁸⁵

There are times when Niebuhr seems to come to a better understanding of Barth, and is able to be slightly more positive towards him in a number of instances.⁸⁶ But in the main, Niebuhr is critical of Barth's theology because of its denial of history:

It is both interesting and pathetic that the dualism of Christian orthodoxy should be finally stated in its most consistent terms in our own day in reaction to Christian liberalism and that the *dialectical theology (Barthianism)*, which draws these final pessimistic and dualistic conclusions, should find no meaning in history or nature except as the one event in history (the incarnation) illumines the scene. It is significant too that this one event in history really ceases to be an event in history and that the symbol of the absolute never really becomes incarnate.⁸⁷

In concluding this section on Protestant Orthodoxy, we need to bear in mind that while Niebuhr was very critical of this worldview, he nevertheless retained a positive reaction to

⁸⁵ "The Peril of Sophistication" in *Christianity and Society*, Vol 19, No.3, 1954. p.29.

⁸⁶ See for example the references in *Faith and History*, p.194 where he refers to Barth's famous essay "Christengemeinde und Buergergemeinde"; *The Self and the Dramas of History* p.108 with a reference to the "quality of Neo-Reformation thought, as in Karl Barth"; and *Love and Justice*, p.291. See also the two essays on Barth's response to the political crisis in Czechoslovakia, "Karl Barth and Democracy" and "Karl Barth on Politics" in D.B. Robertson, *op. cit.*, pp.165ff.

⁸⁷ "The Assurance of Grace" in R. McAfee Brown (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.67. Emphasis mine.

Calvinism.⁸⁸ On a good number of occasions he was at pains to point out the difference between Lutheranism and Calvinism, and to affirm some of the tendencies within Calvinism.⁸⁹ The important point for Niebuhr was that some strands of Calvinism were more open than any other religious tradition to human creativity and freedom:

The development of Calvinistic thought from a conservative justification of political authority to a living relation with democratic justice deserves special consideration because in its final form Calvinistic theory probably came closest to a full comprehension of all the complexities of political justice.⁹⁰

It is for this reason and from this perspective that when Niebuhr comes to outline his theological project in the Gifford Lectures published as *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, he does not reject the Reformation, but rather seeks to integrate its insights on human destiny into a working synthesis with the thought of the Renaissance.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Ronald Stone notes that "His thought most consistently is revolutionary Calvinism. He believed seventeenth-century Calvinism, particularly when mixed with sectarian radicalism, produced the greatest social fruits of Protestantism's history." "The Contribution of Reinhold Niebuhr to the late Twentieth Century" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.55; Furthermore, Gabriel Fackre has argued that "A fundamental Reformed theme is an abiding characteristic of his theology". "Reinhold Niebuhr" in David F. Wells (Ed.), *Reformed Theology in America: A History of its Modern Development*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p.263.

⁸⁹ See for example, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, pp.151,169ff; *Christianity and Power Politics*, p.59; *The Nature and Destiny of Man* Vol I, p.221 and Vol II pp.200, 280f.

⁹⁰ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.281.

⁹¹ See *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, pp.299f. and Vol II, pp.204ff.

2.2.5. The Denial of History: Concluding Remarks.

We have now traced a number of the worldviews that Niebuhr analyzed and criticized during his life. We have argued that although these worldviews are themselves very different to one another, Niebuhr rejected all of them for the same basic soteriological reason: they conceived of the relationship of redemption to history as the denial of history.

This denial can take different forms. For Classical Idealism it was the search for salvation by transcending the finite and evil physical world, a concern echoed by Mysticism even in its Christian form. Naturalism, Romanticism and Fascism all denied history in that they chose to establish human destiny on the basis of nature rather than on human freedom and responsibility. Finally, for Protestant Orthodoxy, the denial of history arises because it is so caught up in the judgement of God over all human endeavour that it refuses to allow for the distinctions that history must have.

What Niebuhr finds objectionable in this denial of history is the undermining of ethical behaviour. When history is denied through *the hope of salvation as liberation from history* then history ceases to have any significant meaning, and the human freedom and responsibility to love others is undermined.

In sustaining his critique of this hope of salvation as liberation from history, Niebuhr will come to argue for two "facts of history" that soteriology must take seriously. Firstly, salvation cannot come through either the negating

of the body (forms of Idealism) or the spirit (forms of Naturalism) because *the self is a unity of both body and spirit*. Any scheme of human destiny must take this unity seriously, otherwise it will no longer be *human destiny*.

The second "fact" he will affirm arises from his concern that human beings cannot avoid responsibility for ethical action in history, as this type of worldview and especially Protestant Orthodoxy imply. *History, he will argue, is a compound of both necessity and freedom*. To undermine the freedom to be responsible for "making" history, for making judgements about right and wrong in history, for living according to God's "law of love", is to misunderstand history and therefore human destiny.

Thus Niebuhr is critical of these worldviews because they end up undermining the responsible human task to say something important about human destiny *within history*. A true soteriology will maintain the seriousness of history, and in doing so, maintain God's ethical demand of love.

2.3. The Worship of History.

If the previous worldviews were guilty of denying the significance of history and the importance of the human task to be responsible in history, then the second set of worldviews that Niebuhr feels offer false hopes of redemption are those that worship history. We have suggested above that this category is roughly made up of those worldviews "that expect a Christ", but are later further distinguished by Niebuhr to be "soft Utopian".

These worldviews are predominantly those that grew out of the Renaissance and were built upon the tremendous optimism that people felt in the light of their own historical advances in science, technology, culture and politics. History suddenly became important as people perceived that it held the key to human destiny.

History was no longer an enigma. It became the assurance of man's redemption from his every ill.... The dominant note in modern culture is not so much confidence in reason as faith in history. The conception of a *redemptive history* informs the most diverse forms of modern culture.¹

It is in the sense of believing that history *itself* holds the assurance of redemption so that people come to venerate progress and the future that we have labeled this set of worldviews the *worship* of history. In this section we shall examine firstly the roots of this type in the Renaissance and then its modern form in Liberalism and its religious form of Liberal Protestantism. We shall also examine how Niebuhr sees its influence upon Marxism.

¹ *Faith and History*, pp.4f.

2.3.1. The Worldviews of the Renaissance.

Niebuhr deals quite extensively with the worldviews of the Renaissance. If the Thomistic synthesis of medieval Catholicism was a merging of the Classical worldview with the Biblical view, then the Renaissance "distilled the classical elements out of the synthesis".²

Niebuhr holds that the thinking that arose out of the Renaissance provides the framework for most modern secular thought, and so under the broad heading of the Renaissance worldview he deals with thinkers such as Nicholas of Cusa, Giordano Bruno, Montaigne, Descartes, Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, Montesque, Bacon, More, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Leibnitz, Bosanquet, Comte, and Spinoza.³

Two things should be immediately obvious. First, in the space he gives to these views, Niebuhr can hardly give a full picture and account of each one, let alone draw out all the nuances and tensions which each great thinker includes within his or her system. Second, although Niebuhr does refer to various streams of thought within the broad Renaissance view of human nature and destiny, he has tended to lump together for the sake of his analysis views that do not always have much in common. Our comments about typology at the beginning of this chapter should therefore be kept in mind.

² *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.5.

³ See his discussions in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* p.173; *Beyond Tragedy*, pp.229-242; *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, pp.30-43, 61-122; *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, pp.160-169, 231-243; *Faith and History*, pp.2-8, 155-159; *The Self and the Dramas of History*, pp.112-126.

Niebuhr characterized the Renaissance as an attempt to recapture the Classical view of human nature in opposition to the medieval religious synthesis. Spurred on by the rise of scientific and historical knowledge - the "reason" of the Age of Reason - the Renaissance thinkers and their heirs sought to emancipate human thought and awareness from the closed mind of religious dogma. This opposition to organized and established religion is a key theme throughout, Niebuhr argues, arising in the main through the religious legitimation of injustice and dishonesty which reason now sought to uncover.

The modern man was shocked by traditional religion's defiance of the obvious achievements of modern science; but he was also outraged by the historic affinity between established religion and traditional social injustice. He championed enlightenment against obscurantism and justice against a pessimistic and deterministic religious acquiescence in injustice. He hoped that if religious prejudices and superstitions could be overcome, reason would establish a common humanity, freed of division and conflict and emancipated of tyranny and oppression.⁴

Niebuhr's central criticism of the thinking of the Renaissance undergoes a change over time as he himself struggles to put his finger on exactly what he disagrees with. Earlier in his thinking he makes the characteristic criticism of the Renaissance and Enlightenment that "a non-Christian humanism makes human reason God".⁵

Thus it is obvious that the very reason, which modern culture has regarded as God, as the principle of universality and as the guarantor of goodness, is really man's problem and not his answer to the problem.⁶

⁴ *Beyond Tragedy*, pp.229f.

⁵ *Beyond Tragedy*, p.236.

⁶ *Beyond Tragedy*, p.242.

By the time of his first full analysis of the Renaissance in the lectures which comprise the first volume of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr sees the fundamental problem lying at a deeper level, namely of inner contradictions in the conflicting understandings of human nature, a misunderstanding of human individuality and a too optimistic view of evil.⁷ Towards the end of his discussion on evil, he notes what will later become the central criticism of modern thought: the idea of progress.⁸

When he shifts in volume two of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* to talking about human destiny, this criticism is now the key issue that he raises. He argues that for all its rejection of the Christian worldview, the Renaissance unconsciously appropriated the Biblical linear conception of time and of meaningful history. This meant that the concept of "progress" was enshrined as a significant part of the Renaissance creed.⁹ But, argues Niebuhr, while the idea of progress was taken from Christianity, the optimistic view of human nature meant that the Renaissance "did not recognize that history is filled with endless possibilities of good and evil":

It did not recognize that every new human potency may be an instrument of chaos as well as of order; and that history, therefore has no solution of its own problem.¹⁰

By the time Niebuhr came to prepare the material for his book *Faith and History*, he had begun to turn this issue of progress and history into the overriding issue at stake

⁷ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, pp.18-25.

⁸ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.24.

⁹ See his comments in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.154.

¹⁰ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.155.

between the Christian faith and modern secular thought stemming from the Renaissance. Here he argues that what unites and characterizes these different strands of thought and separates them from Classical thought is not so much belief in reason, but a fundamentally different conception of time, and therefore of history.

The Renaissance, which ostensibly restored classical learning, was actually informed by a very unclassical sense of history.... The classical conception of time as a cycle of endless recurrences was finally overcome. Time was no longer a mystery which required explanation. It became the principle of interpretation by which the mystery of life was comprehended.¹¹

Thus the thesis of the book grows out of this perception of the differences between modern secular thought and Christian belief. It centres on the issue of the theme that we have seen is central to his thinking: the issue of redemption. Niebuhr's most sustained criticism of modern Renaissance thought thus becomes its belief that human liberation would progressively emerge as history unfolded:

The dominant note in modern culture is not so much confidence in reason as faith in history. The conception of a redemptive history informs the most diverse forms of modern culture.¹²

But Niebuhr is convinced that all the "facts" of history cry out that history itself is not redemptive: "Since 1914 one tragic experience has followed another, as if history had been designed to refute the vain delusions of modern man".¹³ A vast amount of the literature penned by Niebuhr centres around this claim by modern thinkers and Niebuhr's evidence of its delusion.

¹¹ *Faith and History*, p.2.

¹² *Faith and History*, p.3.

¹³ *Faith and History*, pp.6f.

Niebuhr feels that the fault arises in part from the view of human nature that the Renaissance inherited from Classical thought. Here Niebuhr is thinking about the split between the mind and the body which leads to an uncritical appropriation of science and technology, the inability to realize that human beings are both the creatures and creators of history,¹⁴ and the failure to appreciate the tendency towards destruction as well as creativity in human selfhood due to the presence of sin in history.¹⁵

Because Niebuhr considers the commitments to progress and the redemptive character of history to be *a priori* to any scientific or historical truth, he therefore considers modern Secularism to be as much a faith as traditional religion. It is a faith in human reason, a faith in the human ability to redeem the world, a faith in the redemptive character of history itself, and in the end a faith in, and therefore worship of, history. Speaking of its criticism of religion in favour of reason, Niebuhr comments:

Believing itself to be irreligious but wise, it would regard the judgement, with shocked incredulity. Yet the truth is that its confusions arise not from its irreligious knowledge but from its heedless and unwise religion.¹⁶

It is important to recognize that Niebuhr is not only critical of the Renaissance, but also appreciative of many of its advances. This is clear in his stated project in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* to rework a synthesis between the Reformation on the one hand, and the Renaissance on the other.

¹⁴ See for example, *Faith and History*, pp.2-10.

¹⁵ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.23.

¹⁶ *Beyond Tragedy*, p.229.

A new synthesis is therefore called for. It must be a synthesis which incorporates the twofold aspects of grace of Biblical religion and adds the light which modern history, and the Renaissance and Reformation interpretations of history, have thrown upon the paradox of grace.¹⁷

We need, therefore to also note two things that he saw as positive in Renaissance thought. The first was the overthrowing of dogmatic religion in so far as it was a hindrance to truth and justice. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly for Niebuhr, was the realization that humans have the freedom to be creative and responsible in history, and therefore the proximate issues of politics, economics and culture are areas of life that human beings can effect.

There is therefore, no way of understanding the ultimate problem of human existence if we are not diligent in the pursuit of proximate answers and solutions. Nor is there any way of validating the ultimate solution without constantly relating it to all proximate possibilities. *On this issue Renaissance perspectives are truer than either Catholic or Reformation ones.*¹⁸

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2.3.2. Secular Liberalism.

If the Renaissance thinkers established the broad framework of modern thought about human destiny and history it was up to the two modern heirs of the Renaissance, Secular Liberalism and Marxism, to turn this into clearly defined programmes for society. Because of this relationship it is difficult at times to separate out in Niebuhr's thought what we have called "the worldviews of the Renaissance" and now Secular Liberalism for he makes many of the same comments

¹⁷ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.206. This is part of the sub section entitled, "A Synthesis of Reformation and Renaissance", which completes Niebuhr's theoretical discussion of human destiny prior to his discussion of practical applications. pp.204-212.

¹⁸ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II p.211. Emphasis mine.

and criticisms about both. To compound the issue, Niebuhr also dealt at length and with the same critique with Liberal Protestantism (albeit with some important nuances).

We need, therefore, to keep in mind that much that Niebuhr said about the worldviews of the Renaissance is applicable to Liberalism, and in this section we shall therefore focus on what Niebuhr saw as its expression in contemporary philosophical and political thought. In a later section we shall draw together his critique of Liberal Protestantism.

Niebuhr's relationship to Liberalism has been the cause of much study and reflection.¹⁹ Though he was one of the greatest critics of Liberalism,²⁰ he remained close enough

¹⁹ See Ronald Stone, *op. cit.*, Niebuhr's relationship to Liberalism provides the thread throughout this book.

²⁰ "Liberalism" is a word that is difficult to define, particularly in the United States of America setting. In the U.S.A., conservatives usually support "free-market capitalism", and Liberals are concerned for social welfare programmes. With the lack of a popular radical or socialist tradition, the term "Liberal" usually defines those to the left of the political spectrum. For those who interpret Liberalism in a setting defined by European and British political theory, however, Liberalism usually rejects social welfare programmes and supports "free-market capitalism". Furthermore because there is a clearly defined radical and socialist tradition, the term "Liberal" usually defines those in the middle of the political spectrum. Niebuhr himself was astute enough to recognize that in fact American conservatives hold to a classical "Liberal" creed with regard to economics, social welfare and foreign policy: "American conservatism is not conservative at all in the traditional sense; it is part of the traditional Liberal movement and it exhibits the defects of its creed;... As America established its freedom from the aristocratic society by the same historic act in which it established itself as a nation, its orientation is naturally 'Liberal' *par excellence*. It is a more consistently bourgeois nation than any other and its wide variety of political creeds explicate on the various facets of the Liberal ethos in such a way that the term 'Liberal' has become almost meaningless among us because it is claimed with a measure of validity for the most contradictory programmes." "The Foreign Policy of American Conservatism and Liberalism" in *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p.55. While Niebuhr was aware of some of the tensions with the term "Liberal", this is not the case with some of his interpreters, and this can easily lead to a lack of clarity in

to Liberalism throughout his life so that one interpreter could call him "a true son of the American liberal ethos of the twentieth century".²¹ He certainly began his life as a Liberal,²² but then moved quite dramatically away from Liberalism to become first a socialist and then Christian Realist. In later years, he returned to Liberalism albeit in a chastened, pragmatic form.²³

Thus the first thing that we need to notice is that Niebuhr wrote and reflected upon Liberalism over most of his life, and that different contexts give rise to different emphases within his critique.²⁴ There are three major "crises" against which Niebuhr measures the competence of Liberalism, viz. the social situation in the United States with regards to industrial and racial issues, the Second World War and the struggle against Fascism and Nazism, and then the Cold War and the global conflict with Communism.

As can be imagined each of these "crises" for Liberalism gives rise to different perspectives from Niebuhr upon its relative strengths and weaknesses. For example he is much more disdainful of Liberalism when he is dealing with domestic issues in the United States such as unbridled capitalist exploitation and racial discrimination²⁵ than he

understanding Niebuhr's relationship to Liberalism. Ronald Stone, *op. cit.*, deals with some of these issues. pp.158ff.

²¹ Dan Rhoades. "The Prophetic Insight and Theoretical-Analytical inadequacy of 'Christian Realism'" in *Ethics*, Vol 75, No.1, 1964. p.1.

²² See for example Ronald Stone, *op. cit.* pp.19ff. and Michael Link, *op. cit.* P.16ff.

²³ Stone maintains that Niebuhr returned to "a pragmatic-liberal synthesis" in his political ethics. See Ronald Stone, *op. cit.*, pp.131ff.

²⁴ Michael Link provides a very helpful chronological description of Niebuhr's changing analysis of Liberalism, *op. cit.* See also Ruurd Veldhuis' analysis of Niebuhr and Liberalism, *op. cit.*, pp.72ff.

²⁵ As for example in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*.

is when evaluating it in the light of Stalinist tyranny.²⁶ For all the change in emphasis, however, there is a coherence to Niebuhr's analysis and critique of Liberalism that runs throughout his active life. To this we must now turn.

In an article in *Radical Religion* in 1936, Niebuhr summarized how he understood Liberalism in these six points:

1. That injustice is caused by ignorance and will yield to education and greater intelligence.
2. That civilization is becoming gradually more moral and that it is a sin to challenge either the inevitability or the moral efficacy of gradualness.
3. That the character of individuals rather than social systems and arrangements is the guarantee of justice in society.
4. That appeals to love, justice, good will, and brotherhood are bound to be efficacious in the end. If they have not been so to date we must have more appeals to love, justice, good will and brotherhood.
5. That goodness makes for happiness and that the increasing knowledge of this fact will overcome human selfishness and greed.
6. That wars are stupid and can therefore only be caused by people who are more stupid than those who recognize the stupidity of war.²⁷

It is clear that these six points are dominated by the situation leading up to the Second World War, and that issues that he would address after 1945 such as the Liberal response to the Peace of Versailles, the Cold War and Nuclear weapons, The United Nations and world government and the debate about property and economic systems do not figure yet. Nevertheless, it is easy to see how Niebuhr would add these to his "manifesto" of six Liberal propositions.

²⁶ This is the driving force behind his book *Man's Nature and his Communities*. (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1965).

²⁷ In "The Blindness of Liberalism" in *Radical Religion*, Autumn 1936, as quoted in *Love and Justice*. p.12.

It is also clear that the first two of the six points are the ones that Niebuhr returns to again and again, and so we need to focus upon them because for Niebuhr they contain the essence of Liberalism. Indeed, almost twenty years later in *Christian Realism and Political Problems* Niebuhr repeats his contention that these two articles of belief (which as we shall see deal with human perfectibility and with progress) are the "presuppositions which form the framework for most modern scientific examinations of the human scene".²⁸ Let us now examine these two beliefs.

The first has to do with the relationship of injustice to ignorance and intelligence. Because of Liberalism's roots in the Renaissance it depends heavily upon affirmations of the human intellect. The tremendous advances in science, technology and the study of human institutions and culture of past centuries gave birth to the notion that human beings are free to develop and grow and become something other than what they are at present. The relationship between virtue and morality on the one hand, and learning and culture on the other hand seemed self evident, and the renewal and rebirth of society (the "Renaissance" of society) was expected through the education of its members.

Since the ultimate sources of social conflicts and injustices are to be found in the ignorance and selfishness of men, it is natural that the hope of establishing justice by increasing human intelligence and benevolence should be perennially renewed.²⁹

²⁸ *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p.3.

²⁹ *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p.23.

This belief in redemption through pedagogical technique is the root cause of the final four propositions of Liberalism that Niebuhr noted in 1936. For out of it grew Liberalism's focus on individuals rather than social systems, the concomitant hope that appeals to human goodwill will triumph and the belief that the root cause of happiness is knowledge while that of war is stupidity.

In this manner, Liberals sought to bring in the "new human being" and the liberated, egalitarian and just society, akin to the religious vision of the Kingdom of God on earth.

The secular liberal finds similar visions plausible, primarily because he thinks that universal education will progressively universalize the mind until each person will be able (and willing?) to affirm the interests of others as much as his own.³⁰

But the "Social Darwinism" that undergirds all of this is rooted in Niebuhr's second proposition to do with the belief in the gradual moral regeneration of society, and hinted in the above quote by the use of the word "progressively". We have noted the roots of this belief in progress in our analysis of the world views of the Renaissance, and it is on this that Niebuhr focuses much of his attention. Just a few years after he penned the six propositions, Niebuhr had begun to see this as the crucial belief of Liberalism. He writes in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*:

The idea of progress is the underlying presupposition of what may be broadly defined as "liberal" culture. If that assumption is

³⁰ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.87.

challenged the whole broad structure of meaning in the liberal world is imperiled.³¹

As Niebuhr thought and dealt with this particular problem within Liberalism and gave it more of his attention due to its fundamental undergirding of so much of contemporary society and culture, he noted how Liberalism came to assign more and more worth to time, progress, and historical development, so that modern culture began to "exalt time into the position of God".³² The passing of time, allied to a belief in pedagogical technique and technical mastery over nature and society, came to be seen as intrinsically good so that history itself held the key to human redemption. "Thus the conception of time as God undergirds the conception of history as redeemer in modern thought".³³

In one of his sermons, Niebuhr puts it like this:

Modern culture... believes that the historical process is such that it guarantees the ultimate fulfillment of all legitimate human desires. *It believes that history, as such, is redemptive.* Men may be frustrated to-day, may live in poverty and in conflict, and may feel that they "bring their years to an end like a tale that is told".

But the modern man is certain that there will be a tomorrow in which poverty and war and all injustice will be abolished. Utopia is the simple answer which modern culture offers in various guises to the problem of man's ultimate frustration. History is, according to the most characteristic thought of modern life, a process which gradually closes the hiatus between what man is and what he would be.³⁴

Again in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* he states this:

³¹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.240.

³² *Faith and History*, p.43.

³³ *Faith and History*, p.43.

³⁴ "Mystery and Meaning" in *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, pp.144f. Emphasis mine.

Its profoundest belief is that *the historical process is itself redemptive* and guarantees both the meaning of life and its fulfillment. It believes, in short, in progress.³⁵

And again in his address to the First General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948 he puts it thus:

Sometimes the liberal part of our culture conceived the idea of redemption through growth and development. Men suffered (so it was argued) not from sin but from impotence. But fortunately *the whole historical process was itself redemptive*. It translated man from impotence to power, from ignorance to intelligence, from being the victim to becoming the master of historical destiny.³⁶

It is his contention that this is the key to modern culture which forms the basis for Niebuhr's study in *Faith and History*.

The alliance between progress on the one hand and human perfectibility through education on the other hand gave to Liberalism an unbridled optimism in the future.³⁷ As Niebuhr suggests above, the future is seen as the place where human destiny will be fulfilled within history. For this reason Niebuhr characterizes Liberalism as an "utopian" worldview.³⁸

We have yet to discuss Niebuhr's analysis and critique of Communism, yet we need to note here that Niebuhr saw both

³⁵ *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, pp.131f. Emphasis mine.

³⁶ "The Christian Witness in the Social and National Order" in *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p.106. Emphasis mine.

³⁷ See for example *Christianity and Power Politics*, p.84: "The cultural foundation of western democracy is eighteenth and nineteenth-century liberalism. This liberalism rests upon rationalistic optimism.....".

³⁸ See for example "Two forms of Utopianism", *op. cit.* Stone has commented that Niebuhr so equated Liberalism and optimism that this "often led him to equate liberalism and optimism and attack liberalism when the illusion he wanted to criticize was sentimental optimism." Ronald Stone, *op. cit.*, p.38.

Liberalism and Communism as utopian worldviews. That was their similarity. Their difference, so he went on to argue is that while Communism believed that the utopia had been achieved, Liberalism believed that though it was not yet established, history would usher it in. In Niebuhr's celebrated distinction then, Liberalism was "soft" utopian and Communism "hard" utopian:

The liberal creed of progress assumes that men are progressing towards higher and higher forms of social life and more and more inclusive loyalties....

The communist creed of world redemption is the more dangerous because it is informed by a hard utopianism, while the liberal world is informed by soft utopianism.... Soft utopianism is the creed of those who do not claim to embody perfection, *but expect perfection to emerge out of the ongoing process of history*".³⁹

It is helpful for us to note at this stage with this distinction between these two competing worldviews in mind that Niebuhr mostly characterized the United States under this category of "Liberal",⁴⁰ and it illustrates for Niebuhr the strengths and weaknesses of Liberalism as his study *The Irony of American History* details, because "every illusion of a liberal culture has achieved a special emphasis in the United States..."⁴¹

With the mention of the "illusions" of Liberalism, we need now to turn to his critique of Liberalism. As we do so, let us first note the positive points that Niebuhr made about Liberalism. The two fundamental beliefs we have noted above in Liberalism - the belief in human perfectibility and in

³⁹ "Two forms of Utopianism", *op. cit.*, p.6. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁰ "The Foreign Policy of American Conservatism and Liberalism" in *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p.55.

⁴¹ *The Irony of American History*, p.4.

progress - are both affirmed to a point. In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr's most damning critique of Liberalism within the United States, he is able to affirm that "a growing rationality in society destroys the uncritical acceptance of injustice",⁴² and again in his philosophical critique of modern views of history in *Faith and History*, he can note that the "modern creed" unclosed an important truth, "that both nature and historic institutions are subject to development in time":

Modern culture therefore is unique in its recognition of the full significance of historic development.⁴³

For such reasons, Niebuhr can speak of those who hold to the Liberal creed as "children of the light",⁴⁴ having "a zeal of God but not according to knowledge".⁴⁵ Elsewhere, drawing a distinction between the creed and spirit of Liberalism he notes that while the former contained some illusions which have led to confusion, "we must be concerned to preserve most of what is known as the spirit of liberalism", which for Niebuhr connotes freedom.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, while all of these comments suggest a positive evaluation of Liberalism, they all contain a measure of Niebuhr's criticism. Liberals are "children of the light" precisely because they are "foolish" in having a superficial understanding of humanity,⁴⁷ and though they

⁴² *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p.31.

⁴³ *Faith and History*, p.69.

⁴⁴ Though Niebuhr nowhere says so exactly, this is implied in the argument in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, pp.9-15.

⁴⁵ See the sermon "Zeal without Knowledge" in *Beyond Tragedy*, pp.229ff.

⁴⁶ "The Foreign Policy of American Conservatism and Liberalism" in *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, pp.71f.

⁴⁷ *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, pp.10f.

have a "zeal of God" it is precisely "not according to knowledge".⁴⁸ Indeed, most characteristically Niebuhr argues that Liberalism labours under many illusions about human nature and society.⁴⁹ "On every hand the world of the western, secular idealists dissolves into moral ambiguity".⁵⁰

Of the many different angles from which Niebuhr criticized Liberalism the most telling is his assertion that out of its belief in human perfectibility and progress it came to have a faith in history itself. This is the soteriological belief that we have characterized as "the worship of history". This characterization carries with it an implied critique, of course, and this is the central theme of *Faith and History*. He writes in the preface:

The real alternative to the Christian faith elaborated by modern secular culture was the idea that *history is itself Christ, which is to say that historical development is redemptive*.⁵¹

Yet, Niebuhr was fond of saying, the "facts" of history disprove the redemptive nature of history.

To be sure historical development contains creative movements as well as progress in means of destruction. But the fact that history contains such development in the lethal efficacy of our means of destruction and the increasing consistency of tyrannical governments must prove the vanity of our hope in historical development as such. The prospect of the extension of history into untold millennia must, if these facts are considered, sharpen rather than assuage, man's anxiety about himself and his history.⁵²

⁴⁸ This is the implication of the title of the sermon, "Zeal without Knowledge" in *Beyond Tragedy*, pp.229ff.

⁴⁹ See for example, *Faith and History*, pp.70ff. for a discussion on the many illusions of Liberal thought.

⁵⁰ "The relevance of Reformation doctrine in our day" in E.J.F. Arndt (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.253f.

⁵¹ Preface to *Faith and History*, p.viii. Emphasis mine.

⁵² *Faith and History*, pp.10f.

Every new step in the direction of progress brings with it new possibilities for both good and evil. There is no linear progress towards "goodness".

The fabric of history is woven upon a loom which has greater dimensions than any known history. No simple victory of good over evil in history is possible. Every new energy of life and every higher creative force can be, and will be, a force of disintegration as well as of integration.⁵³

And again of bourgeois culture:

Its profoundest belief is that the historical process is itself redemptive and guarantees both the meaning of life and its fulfillment. There is indeed progress in history in the sense that it presents us with continually larger responsibilities and tasks. But modern history is an almost perfect refutation of modern faith in a redemptive history. History is creative but not redemptive.⁵⁴

And again:

The creed is nevertheless highly dubious. It is true in so far as all historical processes, including the intellectual and cultural process, are meaningful and lead to fulfillment. It is false in so far as all historical processes are ambiguous.⁵⁵

This belief that liberation will emerge through progress, and therefore the worship of history is a false soteriology because it does not take some important "facts of history" seriously. The belief of the possibility of perfectibility through education, for example, is based on an unacceptable split between the mind and the body and a failure to realize that because the self is a unity of body and spirit, reason is less the master than the servant of self-interest.⁵⁶

⁵³ *Beyond Tragedy*, p.145.

⁵⁴ *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, pp.131f.

⁵⁵ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.240.

⁵⁶ See for example, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, pp.34,40,41.

In a similar manner Liberalism does not appreciate the fact that history is a compound of freedom and necessity, and so does not understand the necessities of history - the fact that within history there is a need to deal with power, force and natural limitations such as the particularity of language and culture.⁵⁷ It was this failure that led Niebuhr to undertake his task to rescue democracy from Liberalism in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*:

The thesis of this volume grew out of my conviction that democracy has a more compelling justification and requires a more realistic vindication than is given it by the liberal culture with which it has been associated in modern history.⁵⁸

Finally, Liberalism does not see that caught in the tension of body and spirit, necessity and freedom; the historical self is the sinful self, so it betrays itself as "sentimental".⁵⁹ It holds that the "wrong" can and will be eliminated in the march of progress, and that the "good" will come to fill the earth. This is the meaning of the redemptive nature of history itself, and why Liberalism is guilty of the worship of history.

⁵⁷ *Christianity and Power Politics*, p.92. See also *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, pp.130f. Likewise Liberalism fails to understand the problems that the necessities of history cause for the hope for world-government. *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* pp.162f. Niebuhr is also critical of Liberalism for not understanding the implications of power for injustice in the free-market economic system. See for example "The relevance of Reformation doctrine in our day" in E.J.F. Arndt (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.253. See also *The Irony of American History*, p.93.

⁵⁸ *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, p.xii.

⁵⁹ A term Niebuhr often uses, see for example, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, p.33.

2.3.3. Liberal Protestantism.

As we turn our attention from Secular forms of Liberalism to Liberal Protestantism (or simply "Liberal Christianity" as Niebuhr sometimes called it) we must note two things. Firstly, Niebuhr's relationship to Liberal Protestantism displays similar contours as his relationship with Secular Liberalism. He was educated in the Liberal tradition, his teachers at Yale ensuring that he was so schooled in the theology of Liberal Protestantism that he wondered if he had he would ever have an influence in his own conservative evangelical denomination.⁶⁰ While he was highly critical of Liberal Protestantism, and was at one time considered part of the Neo-Orthodox "school", most commentators suggest that his theology remained within the framework of Liberal Protestantism. Rasmussen notes:

Despite Niebuhr's unrelenting polemic against liberalism, he was more liberal than neo-orthodox, and he knew it. He acknowledged that his "broadsides" against liberalism were too unqualified and that he stood deep in the very tradition he sought to reform.⁶¹

Secondly we should note that for Niebuhr, "Liberal Protestantism belongs, on the whole, to the Renaissance rather than the Reformation side of the debate on human destiny".⁶² Indeed, Niebuhr's definition of Liberal Protestantism was that it was a form of Christianity unduly

⁶⁰ See Paul Merkley, *op. cit.*, p.7.; Kenneth Durkin, *op. cit.*, pp.2f.; Ronald Stone, *op. cit.*, pp.22f.

⁶¹ Larry Rasmussen (Ed.), "Introduction" in *op. cit.*, p.22. Ronald J. Feenstra, "Reassessing the Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr" in *Calvin Theological Journal*, Vol.23, No.2, 1988, makes a similar assessment: "Despite his rejection in the latter half of his life of liberal theology's optimism about human nature, Niebuhr's theology remained essentially liberal throughout his career." p.143.

⁶² *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.158.

influenced by the Liberal worldview arising in the Renaissance.⁶³ Many of the things he was critical of in Secular Liberalism he was thus critical of in its religious offspring. Hence much of the critique we have just explored Niebuhr would attribute to Protestant Liberalism as well.⁶⁴

The main difference between the two, was that while Secular Liberalism believed that the intelligent person was the good person, Protestant Liberalism added piety to the equation.

Liberal Protestantism usually drew both from the radical Christian tradition, which placed emphasis on the promise, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature," and from the tradition of the rational enlightenment, which assumed that ignorant men were self-regarding but intelligent men were not, since the "reason" of man was the guarantor of the universal character of this sense of obligation to his fellowman.⁶⁵

The good person was thus the intelligent pious person, and therefore the increase of education and religion, particularly the "law of love" would guarantee a better social order. Niebuhr examines this hope in detail in two of his earlier books, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*⁶⁶ and *An*

⁶³ Niebuhr saw this form of Protestantism as being especially strong in the United States due to the influence of sect theology and the secular perfectionism of the French Renaissance, whereas European Protestantism is closer to what we have discussed as Protestant Orthodoxy. Anglicanism is seen as being a combination of Catholic and pre-Renaissance (i.e. classical) Liberalism. See *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.158n.

⁶⁴ See the comment in his "Intellectual Biography" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.7. "My early writings were all characterized by a critical attitude toward the "Liberal" world view, whether expressed in Secular or in Christian terms. There was, as a matter of fact, little difference between the Secular and Christian versions of the optimism of the nineteenth-century culture."

⁶⁵ *Justice and Mercy*, p.91.

⁶⁶ See in particular chapter III, "The Religious Resources of the Individual for Social Living", pp.51ff.

Interpretation of Christian Ethics.⁶⁷ Speaking of the law of love he writes:

The modern Church declared it to be relevant without qualification and insisted upon the direct application of the principles of the Sermon on the Mount to the problems of politics and economics as the only way of salvation for sick society.⁶⁸

Many of these hopes and attempts to apply the "law of love" to the world of politics and economics were expressed by the Social Gospel movement, and Niebuhr discusses the writings of some of the great thinkers of that school:

Shailer Mathews,⁶⁹ Gerald Birney Smith,⁷⁰ Francis Peabody,⁷¹ E. Stanley Jones⁷² and Walter Rauschenbusch.⁷³ The unifying thought on social issues in Liberal Protestantism is expressed by all these theologians: Christianity's task is to make people more moral, and as it succeeds in this the great moral problems of the world will be overcome.

Christianity, in other words, is interpreted as the preaching of a moral ideal, which men do not follow, but which they ought to.⁷⁴

Again, Niebuhr expresses his understanding of this emphasis of Liberal Protestantism albeit in a slightly disparaging way:

The sum total of the liberal Church's effort to apply the law of love to politics without qualification is really a curious medley of hopes and regrets. The Church declares that men ought

⁶⁷ This is a theme running through the whole book, but see in particular chapter VI, "The Law of Love in Politics and Economics (Criticism of Christian Liberalism), pp.179ff.

⁶⁸ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.179.

⁶⁹ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.183.

⁷⁰ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.183.

⁷¹ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.186.

⁷² Who is more well known as a Christian missionary, but who nevertheless is counted amongst this camp by Niebuhr. *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.190.

⁷³ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.195.

⁷⁴ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.185.

to live by the law of love and that nations as well as individuals ought to obey it; that neither individuals nor nations do; that nations do so less than individuals; but that the Church must insist upon it; that, unfortunately the Church which is to insist upon the law has not kept it itself; but that it has sometimes tried and must try more desperately; that the realization of the law is not in immediate prospect, but the Christian must continue to hope.⁷⁵

The vision of Liberal Protestantism is thus one of optimism. There is a belief and a hope that with the spread of the Christian faith, people will become, and are becoming more loving, and that in such a manner God's kingdom will be established upon earth.⁷⁶ Writing in 1932 Niebuhr says:

In spite of the disillusionment of the World War, the average liberal Protestant Christian is still convinced that the Kingdom of God is gradually approaching, that the League of Nations is its partial fulfillment and the Kellogg Pact its covenant, that the wealthy will be persuaded by the church to dedicate their power and privilege to the common good and that they are doing so in increasing numbers, that the conversion of individuals is the only safe method of solving the social problem, and that such ethical weaknesses as religion still betrays are due to its theological obscurantism which will be sloughed off by the progress of enlightenment.⁷⁷

Allied to this understanding is the Liberal Christology. For Niebuhr this was characterized as a focus upon the historical Jesus as a teacher of love and compassion, rather than upon the Christ of faith.⁷⁸ He becomes the teacher and exemplar, the one who inspires others to acts of love through his own heroic act of love and sacrifice.

⁷⁵ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, pp.188f.

⁷⁶ So for example he quotes from E. Stanley Jones' book, *Christ's Alternative to Communism* to the effect that "the mind of man is becoming more and more latently Christian...The year of the Lord's Jubilee may be nearer than we suppose". *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, pp.190f.

⁷⁷ *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, pp.79f.

⁷⁸ See for example the discussion in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, pp.145f.

For liberal Christianity Christ is the ideal man, whom all men can emulate, once the persuasive charm of his life has captivated their souls.⁷⁹

Niebuhr sees all of this sentimentality and optimism emerging in the Liberal Protestant understanding of the Cross of Christ. Rather than appreciating the struggle and ultimate suffering defeat of love in the world symbolized by Christ on the Cross, it has been turned into a symbol of the triumph of goodness and love.⁸⁰ An optimistic interpretation is given to Christ's suffering which begins tragically but ends triumphantly:

Vicarious love is a force in history which gradually gains the triumph over evil and therefore ceases to be tragic. This is the optimistic interpretation liberal Christianity has given the Cross of Christ.⁸¹

Obviously Niebuhr wants to affirm the victory of Christ over death and sin in the Cross and resurrection, but he wants to retain the "apocalyptic" emphasis in the victory. Liberal Protestantism has misunderstood this, and thus misunderstood the meaning of God's kingdom:

The man on the cross turned defeat into victory and prophesied the day when love would be triumphant in the world. But the triumph would have to come through the intervention of God. The moral resources of men could not be sufficient to guarantee it. A sentimental generation has destroyed this apocalyptic note in the vision of the Christ. *It thinks the kingdom of God is around the corner*, while he regarded it as impossible of realization, except by God's grace.⁸²

⁷⁹ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.130.

⁸⁰ See *Faith and History*, p.128. "Ultimately New Testament faith was to revere a Christ whose perfect goodness was validated by an obvious defeat in history. But there are Christian perfectionists who still do not understand the logic of the Cross. They hope that if goodness is only perfect enough its triumph in history will be assured."

⁸¹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, p.45.

⁸² *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p.82. Emphasis mine.

For Niebuhr, this hope of expecting the Kingdom of God to appear in history is the key characteristic of Liberal Protestantism. And it is this that for him signals its captivity to the ethos of the Renaissance and its betrayal of the Christian faith. "Its Kingdom of God was translated to mean exactly that ideal society which modern culture hoped to realize through the evolutionary process".⁸³ It has come to believe, like Secular Liberal thought, that history is marching gloriously towards the liberation of God's kingdom, and that therefore it is to be revered, or worshipped in the sense in which we have been discussing it.

Indeed, the dynamics and breadth of contemporary history

have presented modern culture with what seemed irrefutable proofs of its progressive views of the social task. The "kingdom of God" seemed to be an immanent force in history, culminating in a universal society of brotherhood and justice. The secular and liberal-Protestant approaches to the soci-moral problem based upon this presupposition are too numerous to mention.⁸⁴

This glorification of history then is Niebuhr's major criticism of Liberal Protestantism. It has bought into the optimistic worldview of modern culture, and has envisioned a progressive march towards liberation: brotherhood and

⁸³ See *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.25. "Liberal Christianity, in adjusting itself to the ethos of this age, therefore sacrificed its most characteristic religious and Christian heritage by destroying the sense of depth and the experience of tension, typical of profound religion.... Democracy and the League of Nations were to be the political forms of this ideal".

⁸⁴ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.245. Thus he writes in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.20. that Liberal Protestantism is bound to the whole Secular Liberal culture "in which the presuppositions of a Christian tradition have been rationalized and read into the processes of history and nature... Democracy, mutual co-operation, the League of Nations, international trade reciprocity, and other similar conceptions are regarded as the ultimate ideals of the human spirit".

justice, aided by the Christian Gospel's call for love. It too is guilty of the worship of history.⁸⁵

For Niebuhr this worship of history is grounded in the same faults of Secular Liberalism, most significantly the failure to take sin seriously. So Liberal Protestantism, like its Secular counterpart, sees the creative side of human freedom in history, but fails to see the destructive possibilities of human progress.⁸⁶ Along with Secular Liberalism it denies the reality of evil in the world:

Liberal Christianity adopted the simple expedient of denying, in effect, the reality of evil in order to maintain its hope in the triumph of the ideal of love in the world. This results in political theories which are not able to cope with the problem of establishing a relative justice in society through the strategic use of coercion, conflict and balances of power.⁸⁷

The reference to coercion and conflict is a pointer to another of Niebuhr's criticisms of Liberal Protestantism. While it made much of the creative freedom of history, it failed to appreciate that history is a compound of freedom and necessity. This much emerges in the optimistic hopes for the establishment of love in history.⁸⁸ The hope is to

⁸⁵ This brings forth some interesting parallels with Barth's critique of Liberal theology as "awe in the presence of history". Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p.9. (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

⁸⁶ See *The Self and the Dramas of History*, p.96. "Every effort to reduce this scandal by 'liberal' Protestant Christianity,.. [has led] to a consequent misreading of the human situation, usually with the result of conforming to the sentimentalities of our age. For our age did not take seriously enough the intimate relation between the creative and evil possibilities of human freedom."

⁸⁷ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, pp.152f. See also the comment on p.129: "There is thus a mystery of evil in human life to which modern culture has been completely oblivious. Liberal Christianity, particularly in America, having borrowed heavily from the optimistic credo of modern thought, sought to read this optimism back into the gospels".

⁸⁸ See *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.21. "The transcendent impossibilities of the Christian ethic of love became, in modern culture, the immanent and imminent possibilities of an historical

change individuals, to call upon individuals to act more lovingly and to focus all its energy at this level rather than at the level of social structures.⁸⁹

But due to the necessities of history, and the existence of sin in history, Niebuhr maintains that the love commandment cannot simply be realized in history.

The impossibility of the [love] ideal must be insisted upon against all those forms of naturalism, liberalism and radicalism which generate utopian illusions and regard the love commandment as ultimately realizable because history knows no limits of its progressive approximations.⁹⁰

For Niebuhr then, any attempt to deal with social ethics has to also look at structural issues to do with the economy, property, wages, etc.⁹¹ He is very critical of philanthropy⁹² because it refuses to deal with the social issue at the level of sociality, preferring rather to exhort individuals to be more loving. Charity takes the place of justice by failing to take seriously the necessities of history, the physical forces of human life in community.⁹³

Niebuhr calls these appeals to the moral will both "politically unrealistic" and "religiously superficial"⁹⁴, and also "the final bankruptcy of the Liberal Christian

process; and the moral complacency of a generation is thereby supported rather than challenged."

⁸⁹ See *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.191. "Liberal Christianity ... has insisted that good-will can establish justice, whatever the political and economic mechanisms may be."

⁹⁰ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.128.

⁹¹ See the discussion in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, pp.192-195.

⁹² See *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.193. "Christian love in a society of great inequality means philanthropy. Philanthropy always compounds the display of power with the expression of pity."

⁹³ See *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.183.

⁹⁴ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, pp.188f.

approach to politics".⁹⁵ It is "really a religio-moral version of laissez-faire economics",⁹⁶ and "moralistic utopianism".⁹⁷ So Niebuhr's characteristic critique of Liberal Protestantism is that it is "sentimental".⁹⁸

Liberal Protestantism remains emeshed in sentimental and illusory historical hopes.⁹⁹

The best illustration of these sentimental and illusory hopes arising from the failure to deal with issues of power and sociality was Protestant Liberalism support for pacifism.¹⁰⁰ Niebuhr is scathing of this position, and his main criticism is that pacifists do not take seriously the necessities of history, in this case the coercive nature of society and the fact that conflict is part of any community of people who seek to live together.

So in the end, Liberal Protestantism could not overcome the limitations of Secular Liberalism because it also did not take seriously the reality of sin in history, and the fact that history was a compound of freedom and necessity. It hoped that by promoting religion the Kingdom of God could be achieved, but even this could not overcome the facts of history:

This is not to decry either piety or intelligence or to deny the value of the compound which contains both. Yet it is necessary to insist that this form of human goodness, as every other form,

⁹⁵ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.190.

⁹⁶ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.181.

⁹⁷ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.182.

⁹⁸ See *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.78. "If defeatism is the besetting sin of both Catholic and Protestant orthodoxy, sentimentality is the peculiar vice of liberal Protestantism."

⁹⁹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.158.

¹⁰⁰ See *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.186; "Why I leave the F.O.R." in *Love and Justice*. p.257; and "Why the Christian Church is not Pacifist", "The War and American Churches" and "Peace and the Liberal Illusion" in *Christianity and Power Politics*.

is subject to its own peculiar corruptions and to some corruptions which are not peculiar but merely the natural and inevitable corruptions of all human goodness.¹⁰¹

If the soteriological orientation is already false, then an increase in religion will not solve the basic problem but can in fact compound it:

Religion is not simply as is generally supposed an inherently virtuous human quest for God. It is merely a final battleground between God and man's self-esteem. In that battle even the most pious practices may be instruments of human pride.¹⁰²

Liberal Protestantism, like its Secular counterpart, thus fails to take the "facts of history" seriously, and promotes a false soteriology, the worship of history.

2.3.4. Marxism.

Before we begin to deal with Marxism, we need to note that we are including both "Marxism" and "Established Communism" in our analysis of false soteriologies, and that we are placing them in different categories. Briefly, the reason is that one can discern in Niebuhr's thought a difference between Marxism which "worships history", and Established Communism which claims to have "completed history".

Although in his writing after the Second World War it is often difficult to discern any difference in Niebuhr's thought between Marxism and Russian Communism, and indeed he often uses the two interchangeably, we need to analyze Niebuhr's thinking of philosophy and worldview of Marxism as an open system that believed history was marching towards an inevitable redemptive climax, (and thus the worship of

¹⁰¹ *Beyond Tragedy*, pp.126f.

¹⁰² *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.200.

history) and Communism as it was established in the U.S.S.R. which believed that in it the climax had been achieved, (and thus that history had been completed). This distinction has also been identified by Michael Link,¹⁰³ Larry Rasmussen,¹⁰⁴ Charles West,¹⁰⁵ and Ronald Stone.¹⁰⁶

What is clear is that Niebuhr's thinking on Marxism, like that on Liberalism, underwent changes and developments over the years. Various interpreters have examined his relationship to Marxism with a variety of conclusions,¹⁰⁷ including Dennis McCann who feels that because of "a critical appreciation of Marxist social thought" his political strategies should be understood as "post-Marxist" rather than "anti-Marxist"¹⁰⁸ and Beverly Harrison who dismisses Niebuhr's understanding of Marxism:

¹⁰³ Michael Link, *op. cit.*, p. 80: "Niebuhr at the end of the 1930's had become very critical of Russian communism, though he still thought of himself as a Marxist".

¹⁰⁴ This distinction is implied in his "Introduction", Larry Rasmussen (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.35: "The initial question is the adequacy of Niebuhr's understanding of Marx. His understanding of Stalinism, which is what Niebuhr meant by "Communism" in the 1940's and 1950's is not in question."

¹⁰⁵ Charles West, *Communism and the Theologians*, (London: SCM, 1958), p.122. "However his picture of this revolutionary Marxism was not that of the closed system of power and ideology centered in Soviet Russia which today goes by the name of Communism."

¹⁰⁶ Ronald Stone, *op. cit.*, p.241: "Niebuhr's break with Marxism was in large part a break with its Stalinist expressions."

¹⁰⁷ See for example Michael Link who examines his thought on Marxism and Communism as it develops historically, *op. cit.* See also Ronald Stone's chapter "The Rise and Fall of the Socialist Alternative" in *op. cit.*, pp.54ff.; Ruurd Veldhuis has a discussion on Niebuhr and Marxism in *op. cit.*, pp.72ff.; See also sections of Charles West discussion on Niebuhr in *op. cit.*, pp.117ff.; See also Dennis McCann, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Jacques Maritain on Marxism: A Comparison of Two Traditional Models of Practical Theology" in *The Journal of Religion*. Vol 58, No.2, 1978. pp.140ff. For a highly critical, but astute evaluation, see Beverly Harrison, "The Role of Social Theory in Religious Social Ethics" in *Making the Connections* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), p.58ff.

¹⁰⁸ Dennis McCann, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Jacques Maritain on Marxism: A Comparison of Two Traditional Models of Practical Theology" in *The Journal of Religion*. Vol 58, No.2, April 1978. p.153.

We must learn to treat his evaluation of Marxist social theory both as misinformed and substantively inaccurate.¹⁰⁹

Whatever the case, we should bear in mind the role of polemics in Niebuhr's method, and that in his critique of Marxism he discloses something of his own thought.

For Niebuhr, Marxism was a child of the Renaissance, and thus was a close relation to the other worldviews we have analyzed under the heading of the "worship of history". In this remarkable passage in the second volume of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, he links them all together from this perspective.

Every interpretation of human history which has some understanding of the transcendent norm of historical ethics is inclined to fall into the error of regarding the transcendent norm as a simple possibility. This error runs through the thought of most sectarian versions of Christianity and through the secularized forms of Christianity in the *Renaissance and the Enlightenment*.

It is an error to which American liberal Protestantism has been particularly prone because sectarian and secular perfectionism have been compounded in this form of the Christian faith. Marxist apocalypticism also share in this error. Whether by sanctifying grace (as in sectarian interpretations) or by the cumulative force of universal education (as in secular liberalism) or by a catastrophic reorganization of society (as in Marxism), it is believed possible to lift historic life to the plane upon which all distinctions between mutual love and disinterested and sacrificing love vanish.¹¹⁰

What Niebuhr considers to be the "error" of Marxism is that which we have already noted in the previous two worldviews in this category. It has a profound faith that historic life can become more and more perfect. Like bourgeois Liberalism, Marxism was an optimistic creed that

¹⁰⁹ Beverly Harrison, *op. cit.*, p.60.

¹¹⁰ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.86. Emphasis mine.

believed that history was redemptive. Placing Marxism along with bourgeois Liberalism in the category of the "Children of the Light", Niebuhr writes:

Perhaps the most remarkable proof of the power of this optimistic creed, which underlies democratic thought, is that Marxism, which is ostensibly a revolt against it, manages to express the same optimism in another form...

The similarities between classical *laissez-faire* theory and the vision of an anarchistic millennium in Marxism are significant, whatever may be the superficial differences. Thus the provisionally cynical Lenin, who can trace all the complexities of social conflict in contemporary society with penetrating shrewdness, can also express the utopian hope that the revolution will usher in a period of history which will culminate in the Marxist millennium of anarchism.¹¹¹

So Marxism is also seen by Niebuhr as being a child of the Renaissance through its belief that history was its own redeemer. But against Liberal thought which saw gradual movements towards the perfect liberated society in history, Marxism saw an inevitable movement towards a final climax, after which the perfect community would be established in history. Niebuhr sees in this notion of a climax to history rather than a gradual movement a "catastrophism, completely foreign to the dominant mood of modern culture, but closely related to the catastrophism of Jewish prophesy".¹¹² In this hope which history is bound to deliver "we have again the Jewish hope for a redeemed world, not above history but at the end of history"¹¹³.

Marxism thus has a highly developed understanding of history and the defined stages towards liberation which it has borrowed from Hegel's dialectic but in which it finds

¹¹¹ *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, pp.31f.

¹¹² *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.28.

¹¹³ *Christianity and Power Politics*, p.190.

the "propulsive power of history" not in pure reason, but in "the dynamic of historical economic relations".¹¹⁴ This belief that history itself has a clear movement towards the redeemed community is identified by Niebuhr in the communist manifesto:¹¹⁵

National differences and antagonism are daily vanishing more and more, owing to freedom of commerce and uniformity in modes of production. The supremacy of the proletariat will cause them to vanish still further. In proportion as antagonism between classes vanishes, the hostility of one nation to another will come to an end..... We shall have an association in which the free development of each is the free development of all.¹¹⁶

It is for this reason that Niebuhr speaks of Karl Marx's conception of a redemptive history, and can place him in the same line of succession from the Renaissance as Leibnitz, Herder, Kant, Hegel, J.S. Mill, Herbert Spencer and John Dewey.¹¹⁷ He goes on to say:

Even Karl Marx, who introduced a provisional historical catastrophism to challenge the optimism of bourgeois life, did not shake the modern conception of a redemptive history basically. He saw in the process of historical development certain "dialectical" elements not observed in bourgeois theories. He knew that there is disintegration as well as increasing integration in history; that there is death as well as growth.

But he also believed that a new life and a new age would rise out of the death of an old one with dialectical necessity. Catastrophe was the certain prelude of redemption in his scheme of salvation.

The ultimate similarity between Marxist and bourgeois optimism, despite the provisional catastrophism of the former, is, in fact, the most telling proof of the unity of modern culture. It is a unity which transcends warring social

¹¹⁴ See the discussion in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.45.

¹¹⁵ In terms strikingly similar to those expressed by E. Stanley Jones from a Liberal Protestant perspective in the previous section.

¹¹⁶ Quoted in this context in *Beyond Tragedy*, p.243.

¹¹⁷ See the argument in *Faith and History*, pp.2f.

philosophies, conflict between which contributed to the refutation of a common hope.¹¹⁸

The difference between a slow progress to the redeemed society (of Liberal thought) and a cataclysmic birth of this redeemed community (of Marxist thought) is thus a key difference between the two worldviews, although Niebuhr is at pains to point out the underlying similarity in terms of the belief that history itself is redemptive. But it is not in the first place an intellectual difference. Rather, it is born out of the real life experience of those who suffer in bourgeois society - the proletariat - and who can see no benefit arising from "progress". They are convinced that the whole order of things must be replaced.

For the proletariat the focus is upon the unjust power relations centered in property. In his striking study of the "Ethical attitudes of the Proletarian class" in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr articulates the relationship between Marxism and the working class:

The effect of this development of an industrial civilization is vividly revealed in the social and political attitudes of the modern proletarian class. These attitudes have achieved their authoritative expression and definition in Marxian political philosophy....¹¹⁹

And again,

wherever social injustice rests heaviest upon the worker, wherever he is most completely disinherited, wherever the slight benefits, which political pressure has forced from the owning classes, have failed to materialize for him, he expresses himself in the creed of the unadulterated and unrevised Marx.¹²⁰

118 *Faith and History*, pp.3f.

119 *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, pp.143f.

120 *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p.147.

So the very kind of life that bourgeois Liberalism saw as progressing towards the redeemed community was experienced by the proletariat as progressing towards further oppression. Its historical hope for liberation therefore centered in an overthrowing of the old order and a replacing of it with a new order and a new kind of property relationship,- the collective ownership of property. Long after his positive evaluation of Marxism in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, and in a very anti-Marxist phase¹²¹ Niebuhr could still appreciate this:

The obvious illusions of the liberal world prompted a Marxist rebellion against the whole liberal culture. In place of confidence in a simple harmony of all social forces it proclaimed confidence in a new harmony of society through a revolutionary destruction of property, thus making a social institution the root of evil in man and promising redemption through its destruction. In place of the idea of redemption through endless growth and development it promised redemption through the death of an old order and the rise of a new one.¹²²

Niebuhr saw two positive elements of Marxism in its pursuit of the liberated and redeemed community. It had a certain realism that took the "facts of history seriously". Firstly, in appreciating the self as a unity of body and spirit it recognized that reason could be the servant of passion, and thus Niebuhr credits it with the discovery of the power of ideology. In the critique of Liberalism's perceptions of social harmony Marx perceived that truth was being used to rationalize its own limited perspective. The

¹²¹ See the discussion of Niebuhr's changing appreciation of Marxism below.

¹²² *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, pp106f.

very claim of bourgeois science and political-economy to have a universal truth was ideological:

All truth is spoken from a perspective. It is, therefore, however subtle, a weapon of one ego, individual or collective, against another. It is a tool of conflict. This is the truth in the Marxist theory of ideology...¹²³

Secondly, Marxism appreciated the necessities of historical existence, and so was aware that justice and equality were not simply the fruit of moral exhortation or education and religion as in Liberal schemes of redemption, but required a change in social structure. For Niebuhr, the Marxian

is not cynical but only realistic, in maintaining that disproportion of power in society is the real root of social injustice. We have seen how inevitably special privilege is associated with power, and how the ownership of the means of production is the significant power in modern society. The clear recognition of that fact is the greatest ethical contribution which Marxian thought has made to the problem of social life.¹²⁴

WESTERN CAPE

We have mentioned above that Niebuhr's relationship to Marxism underwent changes during his life. This much can be noted from a comparison of his early book *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) with *Christian Realism and Political Problems* written twenty years later at the height of the Cold War (1953).

In the early period Niebuhr expressed positive support for Marxism, even calling himself a Christian Marxian¹²⁵ and

¹²³ "Politics and the Christian Ethic" in *Christianity and Society*, Vol 5 No 4, 1940, p.24.

¹²⁴ *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p.163.

¹²⁵ This is surely the meaning of the phrase, "Those of us who are Christian Marxians" in his highly personal essay, "Why I Leave the F.O.R." (1934) in *Love and Justice*, p.257.

relying to a great deal upon a Marxian social analysis.¹²⁶

In *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* he writes:

Whatever the defects of Marxism as a philosophy and as a religion, and even as a political strategy, its analyses of the technical aspects of the problem of justice have not been successfully challenged, and every event in contemporary history seems to multiply the proofs of its validity.¹²⁷

For a number of years he expressed a great deal of support for socialism and the social ownership of property, and argued that "the programme of the Marxian will merely provide the only possible property system compatible with the necessities of a technical age."¹²⁸ This grew out of his noted concern that structural change was needed to achieve justice:

Thus modern society progresses naturally from the democratic to the socialistic hope. The socialistic hope is valid not as the augury of a perfect society but as the promise of the only possible social organization compatible with the necessities of a technical age.¹²⁹

And so for example, Niebuhr felt that after the First World War Germany should have been given the chance to develop a socialist economy, "the chance of creating a property system upon the Continent that would give a new unity and health to its economic life."¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Charles West notes, "Niebuhr was a Marxist during the depression years in his working analysis of and strategy for society", *op. cit.*, p.128. The adequacy of Niebuhr's grasp of Marxist analysis has been challenged by Beverly Harrison, *op. cit.*, p.60. "He absorbed the street-corner Marxism of political orators as serious Marxian social theory. Since Niebuhr was an idealist, he read Marx as an idealist. He misperceived Marx's methodology, distorting it in at least three ways...".

¹²⁷ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, pp.194f.

¹²⁸ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.195.

¹²⁹ *Christianity and Power Politics*, p.144.

¹³⁰ See the argument in "The Possibility of a Durable Peace" in *Love and Justice*, p.199.

Niebuhr's appreciation and positive affirmation of Marxism and socialism began to wane over the years, particularly due to the excesses of Stalinist Communism, and the tensions of the Cold War. By the time of *Christian Realism and Political Problems* Niebuhr had changed his position. In the opening essay he writes:

Some of the essays betray a critical attitude toward Marxism in both its democratic variety and in its communist form. I have always resisted the dangerous illusions of communism. But the notes of criticism on even democratic socialism are new. They may prove a lack of consistency but they also suggest a movement in our political and spiritual history, which influenced us all and which ought to persuade us the more to disavow pretensions of wisdom for any judgement of the moment. I would insist that *the discrediting of the Marxist dogma in all of its varieties* and not merely in its most noxious form, should convince us, not of the truth of contradictory dogmas, which it was the one virtue of Marxism to correct or balance, but to be grateful for a democratic society which manages to extract a measure of truth from the contest of contrasting errors.¹³¹

What is significant, from our perspective however, is that regardless of Niebuhr's fluctuating evaluation of the Marxist contribution to social analysis and the importance of property relationships in the search for social justice, throughout his life Niebuhr was critical of Marxism as a scheme of redemption, a false soteriology. So when Niebuhr could still be positive towards other aspects of Marxism, this was his point of critique:

Marxism, on the other hand, when stripped of its religious illusions and of *its false promises of redemption* may well contain proximate solutions for the immediate problems of social justice in our day.¹³²

¹³¹ *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p.14. Emphasis mine.

¹³² "God's Design and the Present Disorder of Civilization", *op. cit.*, p.21. Emphasis mine.

And again, in *Christianity and Power Politics*, having argued in favour of socialism he goes on to sound this note of criticism:

This conclusion would be much more obvious if socialists and communists did not obscure it by making impossible utopian claims for the policy of social ownership and promise a society free of every form of social conflict and tyranny.¹³³

For Niebuhr, then, Marxism was a false soteriology because of its worship of history. Note the emphasis on the inevitability of history's redemptive nature below as Niebuhr argues that Marx

presented in short, a materialistic version of historical dialectic according to which the "class struggles" of history would inevitably work towards a climax of injustice in modern capitalism. In this climax, the very ambiguity of history would be resolved; and the revolutionists, by taking timely action in the hour of crisis, would not only destroy capitalism as a system of production, but they would translate the whole of humanity from the "kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom". The point is that men would be emancipated from the curious ambiguity of being at once creators and creatures of the historical process and would become absolute masters of their own destiny. *This was obviously not simply an economic and social theory but a scheme of redemption.*¹³⁴

And again elsewhere:

The struggle between rich and poor, between the owners and the workers in modern industrial society, is a fact which Marxism illumined, and which both orthodox Christianity and liberalism were inclined to obscure. But Marxism falsely made it into a final act of history which was supposed to bear within itself the possibility of an ultimate redemption of history.¹³⁵

It should be clear then that irrespective of whether he was in a phase of disagreeing or agreeing with Marxism and

¹³³ In "Modern Utopians" in *Christianity and Power Politics*, pp.144f.

¹³⁴ *Pious and Secular America*, pp.44f. Emphasis mine.

¹³⁵ *Faith and History*, p.212. Emphasis mine.

socialism, for Niebuhr *this* concern - the worship of history - remains the central fault of Marxism.

What remains for us to note is the key failing of this soteriology, i.e. what made it a false hope of redemption. For Niebuhr it was clear that the Marxist worship of history would lead to disillusion because it is impossible to achieve a redeemed community in history for the facts of history clearly indicate that *the historical self is the sinful self*.

An optimism which depends upon the hope of the complete realization of our highest ideals in history is bound to suffer ultimate disillusionment. All such optimistic illusions have resulted in such a fate throughout history. Always there comes a period when scoffers will arise to say, "Since the fathers have fallen asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation" (2 Peter 3:4).

The beauty and meaning of human life are partially revealed in ideals and aspirations which transcend all possibilities of achievement in history. They may be approximated and each approximation may lead to further visions. But the hope of their complete fulfillment arises from a confusion of spirit and nature, and a failure to realize that life in each moment of history moves not only forward but upward, and that the vertical movement must be expressed no matter how far the horizontal movement on the plane of history is carried.

Marxism may represent a more realistic politics than eighteenth-century democratic idealism. But as a religion it will end just where the latter ended. Its optimism will sink ultimately into despair.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ *Christianity and Power Politics*, p.195. Niebuhr spells this out in the following illustration: "Even a socialist party which is not consistently Marxist, such as the British Labour Party, is embarrassed by disappointed hopes when it becomes apparent, as indeed it must, that the socialization of property cannot overcome the collective poverty of a nation whose wealth has been destroyed by war; or when it becomes apparent that even after the profits of the coal and steel owners are eliminated, there remain some problems of human relations between workers and authority, now symbolized by the "coal board" and the "steel board". *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p.49.

Thus even the belief that one group in history, namely the proletariat, is able to transcend evil so that once they come to power all injustice and exploitation will end and the liberated society will emerge, is a naïve belief in the face of the facts of history.

It is this perception of the all-pervasiveness of sin that makes Niebuhr very critical of the Marxist understanding of ideology. While he affirms the significance of ideology, and congratulates Marx for having provided the tools with which to analyze ideology, he is scathing of the belief that only the capitalist classes are guilty of ideology.¹³⁷ Rather for Niebuhr, all historical perspectives are limited and insofar as they claim a pretension of "objective truth", they become ideological. There is not just one group in history guilty of ideology, but all.

Whatever its great merits in uncovering the relation of economic interest to moral, legal, and cultural ideas and ideals, Marxist theory has become a source of moral and political confusion by attributing ideology to economic class interest alone, when as a matter of fact the ideological taint is a permanent factor of human culture on every level of advance.¹³⁸

Not only did Marxism believe that there is one group free of sin, but in its failure to realize that the historical self is the sinful self it located sin within the social structure alone so that by eliminating an unjust

¹³⁷ *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, p.149. "Marxism understood the class corruption in bourgeois perspectives; but its theory of ideology was not profound enough to reveal the fact that the industrial worker had his own peculiar and unique approach to the social issues, which would not appeal to other groups (the agrarian for instance) as final and true. This error lies at the basis of the Marxist fanaticism and absolutism and imperils the democratic process."

¹³⁸ *Christianity and Power Politics*, p.112.

social structure - namely the private ownership of property - sin would be transcended and a state of redemption would be achieved. For Niebuhr, even the most perfect structure in history involves sinful humans:

Marxism does not understand that even universalized property may become the instrument of particular interest.

The Marxist illusion is partly derived from a romantic conception of human nature. It thinks that the inclination of men to take advantage of each other is a corruption which was introduced into history by the institution of property. It therefore assumes that the socialization of property will eliminate human egotism. Its failure to understand the perennial and persistent character of human egotism in any possible society, prompt it to make completely erroneous estimates of human behaviour on the other side of a revolution.¹³⁹

To conclude: Niebuhr rejects Marxism as a false soteriology because of its belief that history moves inexorably towards the final climax after which the redeemed community will exist and liberation will be a reality. He is convinced that the "facts of history" make it clear that history is not moving in such a direction at all, and this faith in and worship of history is a false hope of redemption.

2.3.5. The Worship of History: Concluding Remarks.

In our discussion of the worldviews of the Renaissance, of Secular Liberalism, Liberal Protestantism and Marxism we have seen that while they differ remarkably amongst themselves, and are often at mortal combat with one another Niebuhr makes virtually the same critique of them, they all

¹³⁹ *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, p.111.

tend towards a worship of history. This is the root of the "irony of American history"!¹⁴⁰

Niebuhr, of course, never used the phrase "worship of history" himself, though we have argued that the characteristic soteriological emphasis of these four sets of worldviews is that history itself is a redemptive force, that events are moving closer and closer to that time when liberation shall be a reality and justice and peace shall reign on earth and that therefore history is given some "numinous" quality. It is seen as the redeemer of all our ills, and in the end is worshipped.

We have seen that this worship can, of course take different forms. Secular Liberalism saw the need for education to flourish, Liberal Protestantism for piety to flourish, and Marxism for events to move inexorably towards a crisis through which social structures would be changed. But in all of them there was not just the hope, but the faith that due to the nature of history the future held the possibility and even the probability of liberation.

But for Niebuhr, this *hope of salvation as a future liberation in history* seeks human destiny too reservedly within history itself. These worldviews all made the forward historical march the sole locus of human destiny (and thus worshipped it), and failed to perceive that because of the existence of sin in human nature, the present holds as much potential for justice and injustice as the

¹⁴⁰ Thus Niebuhr writes in the preface to *The Irony of American History*, "... we are involved in the double irony of confronting evils which were distilled from *illusions, not generically different from our own.*" Emphasis mine.

future. Just as human destiny feels unfulfilled today, it will do so tomorrow. The historical self is the sinful self, and so liberation cannot exist in history. Indeed:

the tragic experiences and disillusioned hopes from 1914 on should have taught us that the whole style and stance of Western civilization must change radically and that history is not the solution of the problems of history. Rather, it cumulates and enlarges every problem.¹⁴¹

In the end, therefore, aware of the inability of human history to redeem itself, Niebuhr will be led to see a pivotal role played by God's transformative action in the search for human destiny. Sin cannot be overcome in history save by the forgiveness of sins, while for these worldviews

their Utopia is, in other words, the Kingdom of God minus the resurrection, that is minus the divine transformation of human existence.¹⁴²

This is what makes them false soteriologies. A true soteriology will need to deal with the enduring presence of sin, and will therefore be sensitive to both the creative and destructive possibilities of human history. It will need to focus upon God's mercy as the transforming power in life. It cannot therefore worship history.

¹⁴¹ "Be Not Anxious" in *Justice and Mercy*, pp.80f.

¹⁴² *Beyond Tragedy*, p.299.

2.4. The Completing of History.

Thus far we have examined those worldviews that Niebuhr felt were guilty of *denying* history in the sense of avoiding responsibility of the ethical demand of love amidst the ambiguities of human existence, and those guilty of *worshipping* history in the sense of believing that history itself offered hopes of a state of redemption within human existence. There is, however, a third group of worldviews that Niebuhr is also critical of and it is to these that we must now turn our attention.

We have characterized them as worldviews that *complete* history. They are similar to those that worship history and hope for a redeemed future in history, but they are also profoundly different. No longer do they wait expectantly for this future, they proclaim that liberation is established, and that they have established it. The long struggles and ambiguities that characterize history are now over, history has been completed.

At the beginning of this chapter we suggested that while both those groups who "worship" history and those who "complete" history are groups who "expect a Christ", and are characterized by Niebuhr as being "utopian", Niebuhr makes a further distinction between "soft utopians" and "hard utopians" roughly corresponding to our distinction between those who "worship" and those who "complete" history:

Hard utopianism might be defined as the creed of those who claim to embody the perfect community Soft utopianism is the creed of those who do not claim to embody perfection, but expect

perfection to emerge out of the ongoing process of history.¹

Three of the worldviews that Niebuhr analyses fall into the soteriological type of the *completing* of history, viz. Established Communism, Messianic Sects, and Roman Catholicism.

2.4.1. Established Communism.

We have previously noted a distinction in the thought of Niebuhr between Marxism as an open philosophical and sociological system and Communism as established in the U.S.S.R.. The distinction, we argued, had to do with the precise relationship to history which is presently under discussion: For Niebuhr, Marxism worships history; Established Communism completes history. This comment in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* puts the matter in a nutshell:

It is a good thing to seek for the Kingdom of God on earth; but it is very dubious to claim to have found it. In that claim some new relativity of history and some new egoistic force make pretensions of sanctity which, at best, are merely absurd and, at worst, unleash new furies and fanaticisms. That is why Marxism is so much better as leaven in history than the realized Marxism of Stalinism.²

There are times as we have seen, for example, when Niebuhr was positive towards Marxism, but apart from after a visit to Russia in the early 1930's,³ he was never positive towards Communism. He retains a respect for a system that

¹ "Two Forms of Utopianism", *op. cit.*, p.6.

² *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.178.

³ See Paul Merkely, *op. cit.*, p.90. "Niebuhr was much impressed by the enthusiasm he found among the people for the accomplishments of the revolution. There was, he found, 'a boundless enthusiasm among the people which transmutes the necessities of the situation into voluntarily accepted sacrifices'."

is focussed towards the future establishment of justice and equality , but he is consistently disdainful of the claim to embody this perfect community. We can therefore note that it is in the 1950's, starting with the publication of *The Irony of American History* (1952) and most especially in *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (1953), in the light of post-Second World War reflections upon Russian Communism, that Niebuhr becomes most out-spokenly anti-communist. No longer is Communism a future hope, but is established and entrenched. And as we shall see it is this aspect of Communism that raises Niebuhr's ire so much.

Communism obviously develops out of Marx's philosophy and sociology, but becomes a distinct political movement and organizing power. The Communist concern is with the inequalities and injustice of capitalist society, and the hope is that the disadvantaged members of that society, broadly defined as the working class or *proletariat*, would rise up and throw off the shackles of the capitalist world order in a revolution to establish the true liberated and egalitarian society, or Communist state. Because of its justice and equality, this state would be to the benefit of worker and non-worker alike. Communism

provides for an identification of the beginning and the end of the reasoning process which is particularly dear to the human heart. It seeks to prove that the interests of a particular historical force (in this case the *proletariat*) are the unqualified instruments of the ultimate. The poor, in communist apocalypse, cannot emancipate themselves from the injustices from which they suffer without emancipating the whole of mankind from all evil.⁴

⁴ *The Irony of American History*, p.121.

Taking its lead from Marx, central to the emancipation of humankind in Communist theory is the creation of a new economic society through the communal ownership of property. Because this is likely to arouse opposition, there is an initial need for a strong, central state but this will wither away as the perfect society emerges.⁵ What is clear to Niebuhr, however, is that this theory is soon discarded and, particularly through Stalinism, the Communist state becomes a permanent feature of Established Communism in the U.S.S.R.. Further, the effects of the Second World War, rapid industrialization in the U.S.S.R. and the Cold War serve to make Established Communism a pragmatic blend of Russian nationalism and Marxist theory.

The pretensions of Russia must be judged as those of any other nation. Its transcendent disinterestedness in the field of world politics is an illusion.⁶

Soon the hopes and dreams of the perfect classless and Communist society are assumed to be approximated, and then they are believed to have been established in the very being of the Communist state itself. Then, argues Niebuhr, because it is the manifestation of the redeemed society, the Communist state comes to believe that it is itself perfect and can do no wrong. Any kind of injustice or imperialism

⁵ *Christianity and Power Politics*, p.145. "The symbol of communist utopianism is its theory of the withering away of the State. The State, according to communist theory, is not a necessary organ of social cohesion but only a tool of class oppression. It is used by the bourgeoisie for the oppression of the workers and it will be used by the workers for the suppression of the capitalists; but once the process of liquidating the class foes of the workers is accomplished, the need of coercion in social life will disappear and gradually a state of ideal anarchy will emerge in which each will give according to his ability and take according to his need."

⁶ *Christianity and Power Politics*, p.114.

is justified and legitimated on the grounds that a Communist society, by definition, could not possibly be either unjust or imperialistic. Illustrating this with Trotsky's defense of Russian aggression against Finland, Niebuhr writes:

... his faith does not permit him to entertain the idea that an essentially communist society could really do wrong.⁷

For Niebuhr the belief that Established Communism is the epitome of the perfect liberated society in which injustice and inequality have been banished is the belief that the ambiguities and uncertainties of history have been brought to an end. Even in Marxist terms, the dialectic of history has been completed.

Communism challenges the bourgeois notion of a discrete and self-sufficing individual with the concept of a society so perfect and frictionless that each individual will flower in it, and have no desires, ambitions and hopes beyond its realities. It thinks of this consummation as the real beginning of history and speaks of all previous time as "pre-history." *Actually such a consummation would be the end of history; for history would lose its creative force if individuals were completely engulfed in the community.*⁸

And again:

The supposed evils of its "materialism" and its "atheism" are insignificant compared with the cruelties which follow inevitably from the communist pretension that its elite has taken "the leap from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom," and is therefore no longer subject to the limitations of nature and history which have hitherto bound the actions of men. *It imagines itself master of historical destiny.*⁹

As with Niebuhr's analysis of other worldviews, the very way in which he interprets Established Communism arises

⁷ *Christianity and Power Politics*, p.133.

⁸ *The Irony of American History*, p.15. Emphasis mine.

⁹ *The Irony of American History*, p.65. Emphasis mine.

from his criticism of it. Indeed this notion that the Communist society had brought history to an end is the central criticism that Niebuhr brings against it. Any eschatological tension between promise and fulfillment is now done away with. The secular Kingdom of God has appeared. It is no longer waiting to be established:

The trouble with all the comrades and semicomrades is of course symptomatic of the trouble in all modern culture. They have found a Christ in history, whereas the only true Christ is he who was crucified in history.... Communism was Christ. Russia was the Kingdom of God.¹⁰

The use of the terms "Christ" and "kingdom of God" may seem inappropriate when dealing with something as atheist as Communism but as Niebuhr was at pains to point out, Communism was not so much a political programme as a faith. It was "a secular utopian political religion claiming a single nation as its 'holy land'".¹¹

Communism is a religion which has corrupted the Christian vision of a Kingdom upon earth... It sought for a kingdom of perfect justice, a classless and universal society. It vulgarized this dream even more than did bourgeois secularism. For it thought that the abolition of the institution of property would assure a harmonious society and ultimately a sinless human nature. Thus it promised a Kingdom of God without repentance.¹²

Niebuhr is highly critical of Established Communism from a number of angles, yet all of them arise out of this criticism that Communism believes itself to be the perfect society established upon earth. At the time of *Moral Man*

¹⁰ "The Hitler-Stalin Pact" in *Love and Justice*, p.79.

¹¹ *Pious and Secular America*, p.50.

¹² "The Relevance of Reformation Doctrine in our Day" in E.J.F. Arndt. (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.254.

and *Immoral Society* he calls Lenin a "sentimentalist" in this regard, and speaks of this hope as a romantic notion:

The hope that the internal enemies will all be destroyed and that the new society will create only men who will be in perfect accord with the collective will of society, and will not seek personal advantage in the social process, is romantic in its interpretation of the possibilities of human nature and in its mystical glorification of the anticipated automatic mutuality in the communist society.¹³

Shortly after this in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, Niebuhr is much more critical of the cruelty and naivety of Communist pretensions of perfection:

The cruelty of Russian communists toward their "class enemies", their naive identification of every form of human egoism with the "capitalistic spirit," and their foolish hope that the liquidation of an unjust class will solve every problem of justice, all prove that here again the social problem is complicated rather than solved when finite men make a final effort to transcend their finiteness and set themselves up as unqualified arbiters over the issues of life.¹⁴

With the passage of time, however, as Communism became more established and the excesses of Stalinist tyranny were exposed Niebuhr came to call Communism evil. Thus in his essay of 1953, "Why is Communism so Evil?",¹⁵ Niebuhr advances four answers to the question.

Firstly, though there is the pretension of equality and justice, Niebuhr argues that the socialization of property which is supposed to lead to a sharing of power, actually leads to a monopoly of power.¹⁶ Niebuhr argues that the socialization of property does not lead to the redeemed

¹³ *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p.194.

¹⁴ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.145.

¹⁵ *In Christian Realism and Political Problems*, pp.33ff.

¹⁶ *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p.34. "If we seek to isolate the various causes of an organized evil ... we must inevitably begin with the monopoly of power which communism establishes."

society precisely because it does not go to the root of human sin, and the fact that the historical self is the sinful self means that human beings find ways of using every system in history, even the socialization of property, as a method for gaining control. In fact the abolition of the balance of power and the placing of too much power in the hands of the leadership is a guarantee for "evil".

Secondly, the evil of Communism lies in its utopian beliefs. Niebuhr is critical of Communism for the illusions it sustains as well as the self-righteousness it expresses.

it must be recognized that the communist tyranny is supported and aggravated by the whole series of pretensions derived from the secular religion which creates the ethos of the communist society. The most significant moral pretension is derived from the utopian illusions of Marxism.¹⁷

The illusions have to do with the belief to be the vanguard of the perfect and redeemed society and the liberators of all who are enslaved, whereas in fact they bring only tyranny and slavery.

As for communism with its illusions of perfection, its belief in a redeemed and redeeming class, its confidence in perfect justice on the other side of the revolution, its inability to understand the nationalistic corruptions in its universalistic dreams, its identification of egotism with greed and its consequent inability to recognize the corruptions of the lust for power in the idealism of its elite; all these errors are so monstrous and so consistently imbedded in a total system of delusion and illusion that it is quite impossible to reach a communist believer with the truth about the human situation.¹⁸

¹⁷ *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p.36.

¹⁸ "The Relevance of Reformation Doctrine in our Day" in E.J.F. Arndt. (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.262.

The self-righteousness is a fruit of the belief to embody perfection. Again Niebuhr makes use of the "religious" criticism of Communism:

The self-righteous fury, prompted by these two errors,¹⁹ constitutes the real peril of orthodox communism. Most of the conventional objections to Marxist "materialism" and "atheism" are beside the point.... Its ostensible atheism is less significant than its idolatry. It worships a god who is the unqualified ally of one group in human society against all others.²⁰

Elsewhere Niebuhr makes the exact same point:

The fury and fanaticism of communism is falsely ascribed to its atheism or materialism. Actually, the real peril of communism arises from the consistency of its self-righteousness.²¹

The third reason why Communism is evil, argues Niebuhr is that it plays God to history. It believes itself to have mastered history so that its "scientists" "know not only the inner meaning of current events but are able to penetrate the curtain of the future and anticipate its events."²² As he points out, this involves claims of both omnipotence and omniscience.²³ Niebuhr goes on to argue that Communist fury is a by-product of the frustration of discovering that history does not conform to their logic:²⁴

¹⁹ Niebuhr is referring here to his discussion of what he calls Communism's non-prophetic Messianism and post-Christian utopianism which "prompts the illusion of the appearance of a kingdom of perfect righteousness in history". See the discussion in *Faith and History*, p.211.

²⁰ *Faith and History*, p.211.

²¹ "The Relevance of Reformation Doctrine in our Day" in E.J.F. Arndt. (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.255.

²² *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, pp.39f.

²³ *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p.39. See also *Christianity and Power Politics*, p.137: "If there is not some transcendent reference from which a particular historical mission is judged, the executors of divine judgment in history vainly imagine themselves to be God, even if they do not believe in God - or perhaps particularly if they do not believe in God."

²⁴ *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p.40.

For communism believes that it is possible for man, at a particular moment in history, to take "the leap from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom." The cruelty of communism is partly derived from the absurd notion that the communist movement stands on the other side of this leap and has the whole of history in its grasp. Its cruelty is partly due to the frustration of the communist overlords of history when they discover that the "logic" of history does not conform to their delineation of it.²⁵

The fourth reason why Communism is "so evil" according to Niebuhr in his essay is due its "Marxist dogmatism, coupled with its pretensions of scientific rationality".²⁶ Niebuhr is critical of the way that Communism is led into lies,²⁷ irrationalities and implausible charges²⁸ all of which stem from the pretension of being perfect. There is no tolerance of a divergence of opinion.

In other places Niebuhr adds to these four answers about the evil of Communism. The most significant is dealt with in *The Self and the Dramas of History*, where he argues that Communism sees the individual subsumed into the collective so that while friction was diminished in these societies "they were also bereft of all the richness and variety of the harmonies and disharmonies of civilized life".

Therefore

The communist collectivism which tries to make the community into the source and end for individual existence would have been intolerable even if it had not degenerated into an overt tyranny.²⁹

²⁵ *The Irony of American History*, p.3.

²⁶ *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p.40.

²⁷ Niebuhr sees this in the Communist legitimation of the Hitler-Stalin pact: "This is to make black white and white black in a fashion reminiscent of Nazi propaganda. The arguments outrage the simplest logic". In "The Hitler-Stalin Pact" in *Love and Justice*, p.79.

²⁸ Niebuhr uses the illustration of the political trial of Czechoslovakian Communist leader Shansky in the essay.

²⁹ *The Self and the Dramas of History*, p.222.

In these reflections upon the failure of Communism Niebuhr is making clear his central point: the fault of Communism lies in its belief that it embodies the final perfect community. The ambiguities and conflicts of history as we know it have been brought to completion. But he is clear that this claim cannot be supported by the "facts of history". There can be no perfect freedom in history for history is a compound of freedom and necessity. And even with an increase of freedom, such as that hoped for under the socialization of property, there can be no sinless historical society for the historical self always remains the sinful self.

The belief of Established Communism to have established liberation is thus built on an illusion, and it can only offer false hopes of redemption.

It is not surprising that this version of Hegelian logic should have become plausible enough to become the basis of a new world religion; and one which fills the world with cruelty and with pretensions of world dominion in the name of world redemption.³⁰

In the end, therefore, in its claim to be the liberated community, Communism claims to have completed history and is a false soteriology.

2.4.2. Messianic Sects.

When introducing the distinction between soft and hard utopians in *Faith and History*, Niebuhr makes reference to those protestant sects which he considers to be soft utopians, (the mennonites and the Quakers) and he discusses

³⁰ *The Self and the Dramas of History*, p.124. Emphasis mine.

their influence upon Liberal Protestantism. He then goes on to speak of the hard utopians who

create a fighting community which regards itself as the embodiment and champion of an ideal commonwealth of perfect justice or perfect love, for which it is ready to do battle against all enemies.³¹

In this respect he mentions the Continental Anabaptist movement, and the Diggers, Levellers and Fifth Monarchy Men in Cromwell's forces in seventeenth-century England.

Messianic ideas are of course as old as history itself, and Niebuhr deals at some length with different types of messianic thought in his discussion of "where a Christ is expected" in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II. There he examines what he calls "three elements or levels of Messianism". The first is the egoistic-nationalistic element, in which "Messianism looks forward to the triumph of the nation, empire or culture in which the Messianic hope is expressed."³²

The second is the ethical-universalistic element. Here the focus is not upon a specific group, race or culture but upon the righteous who are impotent in the face of evil and who look forward to the coming of a righteous king who will establish a kingdom of justice. This king is usually thought of as a transcendent being endowed with both power and goodness, justice and mercy.

The third element is the religio-ethical dimension which has to do with the prophetic contribution to Messianism. Niebuhr sees prophetism as a fundamental challenge to

³¹ *Faith and History*, p.208.

³² *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.18.

messianic thought, because prophetism challenges the possibility of any one group of people being righteous before God. Yet the messianic hope of the victory of one group (the race or nation; or the righteous) remained, and where it had little hope of realization made use of the resources of Apocalypticism.

Yet this development in which the Messianic reign is conceived in more and more consistently transcendental terms does nothing to solve the problem which prophetism had introduced into Messianic thought. For the real problem of prophetism is not the finite character of all historical achievement, though that remains one of the subordinate problems. The real problem is presented by the prophetic recognition that all history is involved in a perennial defiance of the law of God.³³

While Niebuhr deals with Classical and Biblical messianic ideas in this section of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, the implications for later messianic thought are clear. For Niebuhr, Messianism is a focus upon the victory of a specific group of people, usually considered by themselves to be "righteous" in the eyes of "God". It is the expectation of a "golden age" of justice and freedom usually presided over by some messianic figure.

In *Christianity and Power Politics* Niebuhr had written of the various strands of Sectarian Protestantism:

They all do have one thing in common. They believe that the Kingdom of God, whether in individual or in social terms, can become an actual historic achievement.³⁴

And in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* he Niebuhr writes:

most of the English sects, who constituted the left-wing of Cromwell's army were implicitly eschatological. They were inclined to regard the

³³ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.29.

³⁴ *Christianity and Power Politics*, p.55.

political and economic system from which they suffered as the final form of historical evil and to hope, therefore, that victory over it would usher in the final period of social perfection.

Thus while biblical eschatology was responsible for their view of history as moving towards a final crisis, the general mood of historical optimism prompted them to seek for the Kingdom of God, without reservation, in history.³⁵

We have already begun to indicate Niebuhr's criticism of messianic thought. It fails to take seriously both the idea to do with the possibility of establishing the kingdom on earth amidst the ambiguities and necessities of history, and with the prophetic question as to the supposed lack of sin of any human group who may seek to be vindicated in such a kingdom.

But the sects failed to comprehend the meaning of the profoundest element in this prophetism. They did not see that all history and all historic achievements must remain under the judgement of God; that the "Kingdom of God" which we achieve in history is never the same as the Kingdom for which we pray.

The sectarians sought for an ideal society in which every contradiction to the law of love would be eliminated. But such a society is no more possible in history than are sanctified individuals³⁶

Indeed, as with Established Communism, Niebuhr is quite clear that when some group believes they have established the kingdom on earth it is a recipe for tyranny. So he notes "the degeneration of Cromwell's City of God into the first tyranny of modern history".³⁷

For Niebuhr therefore, the problem with Messianic sects is the belief that in them the kingdom of God has been established. The ambiguities of history have been transcended, and so history itself is completed. Yet, in

³⁵ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.178.

³⁶ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.180.

³⁷ "The Hitler-Stalin Pact" in *Love and Justice*, p.80.

the light of the same "facts of history" which cause him to rejected Established Communism, Niebuhr rejects this as a false soteriology.

2.4.3. Roman Catholicism.

Before we even begin to analyze what Niebuhr saw as wrong with Roman Catholicism we need to note two things. Firstly, the Roman Catholic Church that Niebuhr discusses is the pre-Vatican II church. Although he does comment upon Pope John 23rd's encyclical of 1963 *Pacem in Terris*,³⁸ all his critical thinking about the church was written before the Council of 1961-65. His perceptions of Roman Catholicism are thus guided by the Dogmas established at Trent and the first Vatican Council. Likewise, his perceptions of Roman Catholic political praxis are clouded by the fascist politics of the Roman Catholics in Spain.³⁹ Secondly, Niebuhr was very aware of the ambiguities and tensions within Roman Catholic thought as his essay, "Religion and Politics" which discusses Roman Catholic political thought indicates. Here he raises three critical issues, but then goes on to express his appreciation for the contribution of Roman Catholic thought.⁴⁰ Allied to this is the fact that in later life, Niebuhr began to appreciate and enjoy aspects of the Roman Catholic church that he previously

³⁸ "Pacem in Terris: Two Views" in *Christianity and Crisis*, May 1963.

³⁹ See for example the telling references in "Religion and Politics" in *Religion and Politics*, H.P. Odegard, (Ed.), (New York: Oceana Publications, 1960), p.107; and "Pacem in Terris: Two Views" in *Christianity and Crisis*, May 1963, p.83.

⁴⁰ In *Religion and Politics*, *Ibid.*, pp.107-112.

overlooked.⁴¹ Nevertheless, as with all the other worldviews Niebuhr criticized, the Roman Catholic one stands for a "type", a soteriological option which he considered to be false.⁴²

Niebuhr's most sustained analysis and criticism of Roman Catholic thinking is in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. In the first volume he criticizes the Roman Catholic understandings of human nature and sin,⁴³ and then in the second volume he turns to their doctrine of redemption.⁴⁴

In this second volume he follows the trends within Roman Catholic thinking from the Early Greek theology via Augustine and Aquinas to the Council of Trent. Throughout, he notes the tendency to move towards perfectionism, i.e. the belief that through the grace of God, Christian believers are delivered from all sin and sanctified, thus being made righteous not just in the eyes of God, but actually perfect in this life.

Niebuhr notes how this grows out of the Roman Catholic belief that original sin is not so much the loss of original righteousness and the corruption of the essential nature of human beings, but the loss of an "extra", the *donum superadditium* which God gives to humankind in addition to their nature (*pura naturalia*).⁴⁵ Through the sacramental

⁴¹ See for example, *A Nation So Conceived*, pp.52ff; and in "A View of Life from the Sidelines" republished in R.McAfee Brown, *op. cit.*, p.254. See also Patrick Granfield's interview of "Reinhold Niebuhr" *op. cit.*, pp.58ff.

⁴² D.B. Robertson has collect a number of Niebuhr's essays critical of the Roman Catholic Church in D.B. Robertson (Ed.), *op. cit.*

⁴³ For example, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I., pp.59,247.

⁴⁴ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II., pp.130-148.

⁴⁵ See the discussion in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.248.

means of grace, this "extra" is returned to the believer who is now justified and sanctified. Reflecting on the history of the Roman Catholic doctrine of grace, Niebuhr therefore writes:

For the Augustinian and the Catholic doctrine of grace are one; and the one doctrine runs consistently through the Catholic centuries. According to it sin is essentially the loss of an original perfection, rather than the corruption of the image of God in man; and grace is the completion of an imperfect nature.⁴⁶

Niebuhr is unhappy with this understanding of grace. For him it means that through the sacraments, human beings in history who are still subject to finite human experience can be free of sin. The problem with this from his perspective is that *the redeemed self insofar as it remains the historical self is still the sinful self*. This much is borne out by human experience. Indeed those who claim to have no sin are precisely those who are exhibiting a sinful pride and self-righteousness:

It seeks for a place in history where sin is transcended and only finiteness remains. In seeking for that place it runs the danger of falling prey to the sin of spiritual pride and of illustrating in its own life that the final human pretension is made most successfully under the aegis of a religion which has overcome human pretension in principle.⁴⁷

Elsewhere it puts it like this:

Every form of Christian righteousness that rests upon a too simple doctrine of redemption must degenerate into a self-righteousness in which the "Man in Christ" looks with scorn and judgement upon the man who is presumably not in Christ. In this connection the analogy between Christ's strictures against the Pharisees and the

⁴⁶ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.139.

⁴⁷ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.144.

Reformation criticism of Catholic self-righteousness is instructive.⁴⁸

Niebuhr does not see this move towards a doctrine of Christian perfectionism as a particular sin of Roman Catholics, but as one that was and is inevitable within the history of the church because of human self-esteem and pride, and the desire to resolve the rational paradoxes of grace and redemption by human reason.⁴⁹

Though it is inevitable, because it "becomes a vehicle of the sin from which it ostensibly emancipates"⁵⁰ the Roman Catholic understanding of redemption is a false soteriology. Niebuhr thus can contrast it to what he considers to be the more adequate Christian understanding of redemption, the doctrine of Atonement, saying that this Roman Catholic tendency was already

apparent in the early church which found the part of the gospel, which promised the completion of incomplete life, more sympathetic than the Atonement, as an answer to the problem of sin.⁵¹

Niebuhr's second focus on the Roman Catholic perfectionist conception of faith and life is a criticism of the perfectionist doctrine of the church.⁵² Again Niebuhr sees the mature Roman Catholic position growing out of Augustine's view. Although he argues that Augustine held to a qualified perfectionism, Niebuhr feels that he begins the tendency to equate the *civitas Dei*, or the Kingdom of God

48 "An Open Letter (To Richard Roberts) in *Love and Justice*, p.269.

49 *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.147.

50 *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.147.

51 *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.147.

52 Again we must remember that Niebuhr is here dealing with the pre-Vatican II understanding of the Church.

with the historical church.⁵³ Writing of the mature Roman Catholic position he can thus say:

All Catholic errors in overestimating the sinlessness of the redeemed reach their culmination, or at least their most vivid and striking expression, in the doctrine of the church. Here the reservations of Augustine are forgotten; and the church is unreservedly identified with the Kingdom of God. It is the *societas perfecta*. It is the sole dispenser of grace. Its visible head assumes the title: "Vicar of Christ"...⁵⁴

Again, for Niebuhr, the "facts" of history show this to be a very dangerous claim, for the Roman Catholic Church has never escaped the ambiguities of history. The church has instead been a curious and tragic combination of the "spirit of Christ" and the "genius of Caesar".⁵⁵ Thus the claims of the Pope are "a very great heresy"⁵⁶ for a "Vicar of Christ",

who represents one among many competing social and political forces in history, cannot be a true representative of the Christ...⁵⁷

Thus Niebuhr argues that the first problem to do with the church arising from the Roman Catholic doctrine of redemption is that of self-righteousness and arrogance growing quite naturally out of the claims of achievement of perfection in history, or the completion of history. The second problem⁵⁸ that Niebuhr identifies is that in claiming to be "perfect", the Roman Catholic Church has stood as a

⁵³ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, pp.138,9

⁵⁴ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.144.

⁵⁵ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.145.

⁵⁶ See Niebuhr's "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.521.

⁵⁷ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.145.

⁵⁸ Niebuhr speaks of these two problems in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, pp.207ff.

bulwark against all other truth claims, and has thus stood against the development of human culture and science.

In the field of culture the Catholic synthesis is equally unavailing... If a human authority sets the limits and defines the conditions under which the pursuit of truth shall take place, it is quite inevitable that significant truth should be suppressed and valuable cultural ambitions should be prematurely arrested under the guise of keeping them within the confines of the final truth about life and history as apprehended by faith.⁵⁹

From Niebuhr's perspective, therefore, the Roman Catholic Church cannot pass the "Test of tolerance",⁶⁰ and will inevitably be involved in Inquisitions because of its misunderstanding of grace.⁶¹ In *The Self and the Dramas of History*, Niebuhr puts it like this:

It is always dangerous to establish any unchallenged human authority because human pretensions tend to grow when they are not subject to challenge. It is particularly dangerous to establish a priesthood in such an unchallenged position because religion lends itself particularly to the pretensions of possessing absolute truth and virtue by finite and sinful men.⁶²

This gave rise to three unfortunate results: The religious experience of the ultimate was collapsed into a political matter; political power was sanctified; and the recourse to dogma drove the new breed of Renaissance thinkers out of the church.

Niebuhr's rejection of the worldview of Roman Catholicism thus centres on the claims of perfection arising out of the belief that within the confines of "mother

⁵⁹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.208.

⁶⁰ Referring to a section in his chapter, "Having and Not Having the Truth" in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, pp.220f.

⁶¹ Speaking of Roman Catholic perfectionism Niebuhr writes: "This error is the root of all Inquisitions". *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.222.

⁶² *The Self and the Dramas of History*, p.102.

church" and through the grace of God, the ambiguities and sinful tendencies of history have been overcome, in other words the false soteriology centered in the belief that they have completed history. Yet within history, even through the grace of God, there is no sinless self. Though touched by God's grace, history remains always under God's judgement.

So Niebuhr can say

"Everyone knows", declared the Pope recently, "that the Church is never actuated by worldly motives." That is exactly what everyone does not know. The whole history of modern secularism is partly a justified cynicism, bred by the church's pretensions of absolute sanctity.

The polemic of Catholicism against secularism assumes that those who believe in God also do the will of God and that those who do not believe in God merely follow their own interests. Actually, those who believe in God are in danger of claiming too easily that they are God's allies; and those who do not believe in God do not merely follow their own interests, though they do have a much too complacent view of their own virtue.⁶³

WESTERN CAPE

2.4.4. The Completing of History: Concluding Remarks.

We have now examined three worldviews which for Niebuhr typify the false soteriology which claims the completing of history. On this issue Roman Catholicism and Established Communism are united in his thinking:

Catholics and Communists are both bound to resent this comparison, but that does not prove it to be untrue. Rival absolutists are not likely to recognize affinities in their conflicting ultimate claims, for they are too impressed by the difference in content to note the similarity in method.⁶⁴

⁶³ "The Relevance of Reformation Doctrine in our Day", in E.J.F. Arndt. (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.252f.

⁶⁴ *Christianity and Power Politics*, p.113.

For Niebuhr then the similarity lies in the belief that sin can be overcome in history. Thus a perfectionist belief emerges in which people believe that liberation is achieved and they are already living in the "kingdom" in history. Niebuhr identifies the resultant flagrant abuses and evils flowing from these worldviews. For him then the completing of history offers false hopes of redemption and is a false soteriology.

Against this Niebuhr will want to maintain that history will never witness the kingdom. Because the historical self is the sinful self, the kingdom comes only at the end of history through the act of one who stands beyond history, God. Furthermore it is not something that comes to vindicate the righteous, for in the end the prophets are right, within history, no-one is righteous before God. A true soteriology in the light of the pervasiveness of sin in history, will therefore have to take seriously the righteousness⁶⁵ of God against all claims of sinlessness, especially those legitimated by religious claims.

This brings our detailed analysis of the three types of false soteriology to a close, although we shall continue to deal with them in the next two chapters. What we have identified in all three is the conceiving of the relationship of redemption to history, (i.e. human destiny), as "liberation". For "the denial of history" this meant

⁶⁵ The term used here, God's *righteousness* is synonymous with God's *justice*. I have chosen the term *righteousness* so as not to confuse our discussion about human justice in history. It will be seen later that Niebuhr uses the term, "the *justice of God*" to refer to what I am here calling *righteousness*.

liberation from history, for "the worship of history" this meant liberation as a possibility in history, and for "the completing of history" this meant liberation as a present accomplishment in history. Our next chapter clarifies in more detail why Niebuhr saw this varied search for liberation as a denial of the "facts of history", and also how the themes of God's love, mercy and righteousness are disclosed as the key to human destiny through the doctrine of the Atonement.



CHAPTER THREE: ATONEMENT AND JUSTICE.

3.1. Human Nature and the "Facts of History".

In our analysis of the three false soteriologies we argued that Niebuhr rejected the relationship between redemption and history perceived as liberation from or in history. For him this understanding of redemption (in its three different forms) failed to take certain "facts of history" seriously, and thus led to various forms of fanaticism and injustice.

In this chapter we shall turn from Niebuhr's critique of these false soteriologies to his own understanding of the relationship between redemption and history. We shall argue that against the conceiving of human destiny in terms of *liberation* he argued for a more adequate soteriology, centered in the Christian doctrine of the Atonement, and which conceives the relationship between redemption and history in terms of *justice*.

This chapter shall follow the broad outline of Niebuhr's articulation of the doctrine of the Atonement in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* where it falls between and acts as the transition from his conception of human nature and human destiny. Accordingly, in the first part of this chapter we shall explore how Niebuhr draws together the significant "facts of history" in his understanding of human nature and history (3.1.). Then we shall turn to his articulation of a true soteriology in his exposition of the Christian doctrine of the Atonement (3.2.), and finally analyze his

understanding of *justice* as the content of the relationship between redemption and history (i.e. human destiny) (3.3.).

We have previously argued for the priority of soteriology (the question of human destiny) over anthropology (the question of human nature) as the basis for Niebuhr's ethics. To recognize the importance of anthropology or human nature for his soteriology - as we do in this chapter - does not undermine this priority, but rather recognizes the dialectic between faith and experience in his method.¹ Indeed, if we define human destiny as having to do with the relationship of redemption to history, then it is clear that we need to have a clear understanding of the "facts of history".

It was Niebuhr's particular emphasis to locate the essential "facts of history" in a correct understanding of human nature, rather than in, for example, economic structures or racial characteristics. Langdon Gilkey writes that in Niebuhr's interpretation of history

the ontological structure of man, his "essential nature", remains constant throughout history as the precondition for history as history.²

And Larry Rasmussen evaluates this method thus:

one of Niebuhr's most creative moves was to take a theological anthropology - existentialist neo-orthodoxy - and transpose it into a brilliant theology of history. In Niebuhr's hands, a theology given to an ahistorical treatment of "the self" was ingeniously crafted so as to interpret collective human dynamics with great insight.³

¹ Even then we might add that the reason Niebuhr was interested in the "facts" was his concern about human destiny in the first place.

² Langdon Gilkey, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology of History" in N.S. Scott, Jr. (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.44.

³ Larry Rasmussen (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.30. Though Niebuhr is aware of the shortcomings that this may cause in terms of social theory. See the discussion below.

We can see this in Niebuhr's critique of the "modern utopians". He writes:

It is their belief that human nature is surprisingly malleable and is to a large degree the product of its environment. The question is whether they have not confused human nature with human behaviour.

Human behaviour is constantly changing under the influence of various stimuli... But a certain *common human nature* underlies all this varied behaviour.⁴

Thus Niebuhr approaches history through an understanding of *human nature*, and we are justified - the more so because Niebuhr's doctrine of human nature is an attempt to understand things "as they really are" - in taking the term to be synonymous with the "facts of history".⁵

Recent interpreters have been very critical of this way in which Niebuhr approached human history through human nature, rather than through an adequate social theory.

Dennis McCann writes:

The fundamental theoretical problem originates with Niebuhr's theological anthropology and its relation to his theology of history... Throughout the process of metaphorical extension, the concepts defining human "selfhood" and "society" were made virtually interchangeable. But while the metaphors of "selfhood" are psychologically illuminating, they may be less adequate as a framework for social theory.⁶

And McCann adds that this inability to develop a critical social theory leads to the most important failing

⁴ "Modern Utopians", *Christianity and Power Politics*, pp154f. Emphasis mine.

⁵ Indeed as we shall see below, Niebuhr sees a fundamental relationship between act and being, human essence and human activity.

⁶ Dennis McCann, *op. cit.*, pp.125f.

in his political ethics, his "ideological drift".⁷ Beverly Harrison has made a similar criticism:

To me it has come to seem a great irony - one that Niebuhr might appreciate - that the empirically oriented Niebuhr actually opened religious ethics to an anti-empirical, and probably the most antihistorical, social theory available in his time or in ours.⁸

Judith Vaughan in *Sociality, Ethics and Social Change* has provided perhaps the most thoroughgoing critique of Niebuhr's theology and ethics from the perspective of his tendency to view individual human nature as the starting point of social ethics. "Because of an inadequate interpretation of *sociality*," she concludes, "Niebuhr's ethical system and approach to social change are marked by certain limitations".⁹

There certainly is this tendency in Niebuhr's approach to the "facts of history". Yet here our awareness of how Niebuhr's prior soteriological concern dominated his thinking about the "facts of history" puts his method into perspective: Because he was approaching history from a prior commitment to individual human salvation, he necessarily gave priority to individual human nature.¹⁰

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.237: "Because he was unable to develop a critical social theory consistent with the paradoxical vision, his later work suffers from ideological drift."

⁸ Beverly Harrison, *op. cit.*, p.59.

⁹ Judith Vaughan, *op. cit.*, p.27. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰ Judith Vaughan is one of the interpreters who draws a direct line from Niebuhr's understanding of human nature to his ethics. When the priority of human destiny and therefore soteriology is appreciated, however, Vaughan's critique would have begged the question: "How are we to understand the relationship between sociality and salvation?", and driven us back to Niebuhr's rejection of the three false soteriologies. In Niebuhr's opinion two of these (*worship, completing*) see too close a relationship between history and sociality and thus lead to the divinization of politics (though here we are pre-empting a future discussion), and so he seeks the answer to the relationship between sociality and salvation precisely in *individual* salvation. Hence his

Furthermore, this soteriological concern led him, on the one hand, to be suspicious of those worldviews which undermined the unity of the self in the *denial* of history. Only a focus on human nature could shake that denial. On the other hand he was suspicious of those worldviews (the *worship* and *completing* of history) which located redemption too unreservedly in history as a form of collective salvation. He thus had a concern to remind them of the deeper problem that history could not solve: human nature.

Something of this concern emerges in the following passage in which he relates a misunderstanding of human nature to false soteriologies:

The modern man is, in short, so certain about his essential virtue because *he is so mistaken about his stature...* He always imagines himself betrayed into this defiance either by some accidental corruption in his past history or by some sloth of reason. Hence he *hopes for redemption*, either through a programme of social reorganization or by some scheme of education.¹¹

It is because of his belief that a correct understanding of human destiny required an appreciation of the "facts of history" in the form of a correct understanding of human nature that Niebuhr begins his major systematic work, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* with a study on human nature. This same theme is one that he deals with time and again in his other writings, most explicitly in *The Self and the Dramas of History* but also in works such as *An*

focus upon human nature as the central "facts of history". Whilst we may agree with Niebuhr's focus upon individual salvation and therefore of his focus upon human nature, Niebuhr's lack of critical social theory will still concern us.

¹¹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.96. Emphasis mine.

*Interpretation of Christian Ethics, Faith and History and Man's Nature and His Communities.*¹²

For all his talk of the "facts of history", these studies of human nature seldom list or clarify just what these facts actually are. Niebuhr's polemical method in which criticism of other views went hand in hand with the promotion of his own meant that he rarely laid out the "facts of history" in constructive detail.¹³

Nevertheless, in his dialogue with various worldviews, which we have analyzed above, three significant "facts" emerged against which he measured the adequacy of the false soteriologies. The first is that *the human self is a unity of body and spirit*; the second is that *history is a compound of freedom and necessity*; and the third is that *the historical self is the sinful self*.

It is Niebuhr's contention that the false understanding of these three "facts" drives the worldviews we have examined to their "false schemes of redemption". On the

¹² One of the more persuasive criticisms of Niebuhr's thought is that he perceived the "facts of history" out of his own social location. Women critics have been unanimous in pointing out that what Niebuhr understands as "human nature" is best characterized by "male nature". This is a central concern of Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich*. (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1980). For example, "The human experience Niebuhr addresses is not women's experience" p.73. See also Daphne Hampson, "Reinhold Niebuhr on Sin: A Critique" in R. Harries (Ed.), *op. cit.* For example, "My criticism is Niebuhr's equation of male with human" p.47, and she illustrates this in a footnote, "Men fight in pubs, women swallow sleeping pills and silently destroy themselves" p.59n. Because the critique centres on his understanding of sin, we shall deal with it when discussing sin as pride and sensuality.

¹³ The index of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, for example directs the reader to the following pages if he or she would follow Niebuhr's thought on the central issue of *human self-transcendence*: "1,2,4,14,55,68-69,72,75,122,124, 146,150,162-166,175,204,270,276,278-279,293." A similar picture emerges on other crucial themes such as pride, sin and individuality.

other hand the Christian faith alone is able to deal satisfactorily with these "facts" and so offer a true soteriology.¹⁴ We turn now to analyze his discussion on these three "facts of history" and to see how he understands them from a theological perspective.

3.1.1. The Self as a Unity of Body and Spirit.

While most worldviews recognize that human beings are neither simply body or simply spirit, Niebuhr felt that they tended to locate the significant centre of being, what he calls "the self", in either one or the other of these elements. Previously we have seen how some worldviews place a tremendous significance upon human affinity with nature, and others upon human nous, mind or spirit.¹⁵ Against this, Niebuhr was categorically insistent that the basis of "the self" or human individuality is the interaction of the two.

Individuality is a fruit of both nature and spirit. It is the product of nature because the basis of selfhood lies in the particularity of the body...¹⁶

¹⁴ Criticizing both Liberal and Marxist political theories he can therefore write: "Meanwhile the facts about human nature which make a monopoly of power dangerous and a balance of power desirable are understood in neither theory but are understood from the standpoint of the Christian faith". *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p.100.

¹⁵ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.4. "How difficult it is to do justice to both the uniqueness of man and his affinities with the world of nature below him is proved by the almost unvarying tendency of those philosophies, which describe and emphasize the rational faculties of man or his capacity for self-transcendence to forget his relation to nature and to identify him, prematurely and unqualifiedly, with the divine and the eternal; and of naturalistic philosophies to obscure the uniqueness of man."

¹⁶ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, pp.54f.

Against the "modern utopians" who misunderstand the "facts of history", Niebuhr therefore asserts that both body and spirit are integral in defining human nature:

The basic and unchangeable factor in human character is on the one hand *conditioned and limited* by the circumstances of time, place, climate, and every other natural limitation, and is on the other hand *capable of transcending self and environment* in a practically infinite series of rational and moral judgement.¹⁷

This is one of the fundamental "facts of history". It is the failure to recognize this that Niebuhr often identifies as the central weakness of the worldviews he criticizes. It leads to a misunderstanding of the two further facts of history to do with the nature of history itself and to do with evil, and therefore leads to a misunderstanding of redemption.

Niebuhr felt that the Christian faith dealt satisfactorily with this "fact". On the grounds of God's "good" creation, one can maintain the unity of body and spirit as the basis for individuality.

This world is not God; but it is not evil because it is not God. Being God's creation it is good. The consequence of this conception of the world upon the view of human nature in Christian thought is to allow an appreciation of the unity of body and soul in human personality which idealists and naturalists have sought in vain.¹⁸

Niebuhr felt that not only did the Christian faith provide the best grounds for the unity of the body and spirit in the self, but it also provided the best understanding of the "spirit". Against materialistic worldviews which undermined the existence of "spirit", and

¹⁷ "Modern Utopians" in *Christianity and Power Politics*, p.155.

¹⁸ See the argument in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, pp.12ff.

idealistic worldviews which identified "spirit" with mind and rationality, Niebuhr conceives "spirit" as self-transcendence, the ability of the self to perceive itself, to think about itself, to remember and to hope.

In the 1963 preface to *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr writes:

In regard to the Western emphasis on the individual, my thesis, which I still hold, was that *individual selfhood is expressed in the self's capacity for self-transcendence* and not in its rational capacity for conceptual and analytic procedures.¹⁹

One of the most significant implications that Niebuhr draws from his assertion of the self as the unity of body and spirit is that both body and spirit are influenced by each other. Against rationalism which stresses the objectivity and importance of the mind and rationality, Niebuhr is constantly at pains to point out that within the self, spirit, mind, or reason, are as much controlled by the passions of the body as they control them. Instead of reason being something to control the self, the self makes use of reason for its own interests. Rationality is therefore not synonymous with virtue, because the self can put reason to the service of prejudice, hatred and bigotry.

¹⁹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.vii. Emphasis mine. Elsewhere Niebuhr illustrates this with a description of Charles Lindbergh's state of being while being the first to fly solo across the Atlantic: "He has, in short, given us a very accurate description of the complexity of the internal dialogue within the self and of the transcendent unity and freedom of the self in spite of this dialogue. What he defines as "spirit" might be regarded as the ultimate freedom of the self over its inner divisions. This capacity of freedom in Lindbergh's analysis contains elements of will and resolution but also something which seems superior to the anxieties of "mind". It is, in short, the self standing above its functions and capacities and yet proving its relation to them". *The Self and the Dramas of History*, p.29.

It is for this reason that Niebuhr is cautious of the effects of rational resources of the individual for social living in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*:

Rationalism in morals may persuade men in one moment that their selfishness is a peril to society and in the next moment it may condone their egoism as a necessary and inevitable element in the total social harmony. The egoistic impulses are so powerful and insistent that they will be quick to take advantage of any such justifications.²⁰

Many years later, in *The Self and the Dramas of History*, he returns to the same point:

But it is important to note that the self is always the master, and not the servant of its reason...

The self, in short, could use reason to justify its ends as well as to judge them, and there was evidently no power in reason to limit the desires and ambitions of men.²¹

And he goes on to say:

The self is usually assumed to be "rational" in the exercise of its freedom over natural necessities. But since the self has a freedom beyond its rational capacities it can subordinate its reason to its desires. It can do what Hobbes evidently equated with the idea of "rational". It can use its reason to prove its ends legitimate.²²

We have established then that for Niebuhr the first "fact of history" is that *the self is a unity of both body and spirit*. The self is not synonymous with just one of these parts, nor is it controlled by either one, but rather utilizes both to its own interest. A true soteriology will need to take this "fact of history" seriously.

²⁰ *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, pp40f.

²¹ *The Self and the Dramas of History*, pp.17f.

²² *The Self and the Dramas of History*, p.20.

3.1.2. History as a Compound of Freedom and Necessity.

We have begun to see the implications of Niebuhr's understanding of the self for the "dramas of history".²³ Indeed, this first "fact of history" leads on quite clearly to a second "fact" that has to do with the making of history itself.²⁴

Niebuhr is aware that due to its "qualified participation in creation"²⁵ human nature is not just a static entity. What sets human beings apart from nature is the ability to break with the given forms of nature and to create new ones. This is what it means to make history. The self is engaged in both *being* and *becoming*,²⁶ and due to their unity, both nature and spirit share in this. From this perspective, Niebuhr identifies these four elements when seeking to understand human nature and its involvement in making history:

- (i) the vitality of nature,
- (ii) the forms and unities of nature,
- (iii) the freedom of the spirit to transcend natural forms within limits; and
- (iv) the forming capacity of spirit.²⁷

²³ *The Self and the Dramas of History* is of course the title of one of Niebuhr's more theoretical books.

²⁴ It is this conceptual jump that we have dwelt with at some length above. We should be aware that Niebuhr integrates human history into human nature at a very fundamental level. Because of the unity of act and being (see below) one cannot understand human nature outside of human history. Hence my criticism of McCann's understanding of human nature as something different to a theology of history (which is how he interpreted the term human destiny).

²⁵ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.26.

²⁶ The terms "being" and "becoming" are not used by Niebuhr to make this distinction, but I think they make clear his thought. Hans Hofmann, *op. cit.*, has made a similar analysis: "Refusing to be satisfied with abstract reflections upon the unity of human nature, he seeks to comprehend its operative effects, its active manifestations. Thus at the very beginning he is able to consider *being* and *action* in relation rather than separately. For Niebuhr, man exists in his activity and acts in accordance with his being."

²⁷ See the discussion in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, pp.26ff.

Human life exists within the world and has to deal with the finite forms of nature and spirit, and yet it is also constantly relying on the freedom of the spirit to step beyond these forms and to be engaged with the vitalities of nature in bringing something new into being.

This interplay between vitality and form was something that the various worldviews struggle to deal with:

The problem of vitality and form is thus a cause of never-ceasing debate in which half-truths are set against half truths. Modern culture is unable to escape the confusion arising from these misconceptions.²⁸

For Niebuhr there is only one way of understanding the relationship of vitality and form in human action, and that is to recognize that both vitality and form, or as he preferred to speak of, both freedom and necessity are essential to history. The second "fact of history" then is this: *Human history is a compound of "freedom" and "necessity"*.

Man is, and yet is not, involved in the flux of nature and time. He is a *creature*, subject to nature's necessities and limitation; but he is also a *free spirit* who knows of the brevity of his years and by this knowledge transcends the temporal by some capacity within himself....

Man's ability to transcend the flux of nature gives him the capacity to make history. Human history is rooted in the natural process but it is something more than either the determined sequences of natural causation of the capricious variations and occurrences of the natural world. It is compounded of *natural necessity and human freedom*.²⁹

It is a theme that emerges in other significant places in Niebuhr's thought. We pick this up in three of his more theoretical books focussing upon the relation of the self

²⁸ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.28.

²⁹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, pp.1f. Emphasis mine.

and history. He writes in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*:

This paradoxical relation of finitude and infinity, and consequently of *freedom and necessity*, is the mark of the uniqueness of the human spirit in this creaturely world.³⁰

And again in *Faith and History*:

History is the fruit and the proof of man's freedom. Historical time is to be distinguished from natural time by the unique freedom which enables man to transcend the flux of time, holding past moments in present memory and envisaging future ends of actions which are not dictated by natural necessity. History is organically related to natural time insofar as man is involved in the natural flux and does not rise above it. All the structures of history are a complex unity of the natural and the spiritual, even as individual man exhibits this unity. History is thus a proof of the *creatureliness* of man as well as of his *freedom*.³¹

And once again in *The Self and the Dramas of History*:

Historical patterns are in a category of reality which can not be identified with the structures of nature. They are to be sharply distinguished from natural structures because they represent a compound of *freedom and necessity*.³²

In more poetic language, Niebuhr begins one of his sermons titled "The wheat and the tares" like this:

Man is indeed like a cork that is drawn down the river of time, carried away as with a flood. But he could not be altogether that, because he knows about it; he speculates about it as the Psalmist does, and about the significance of it.

Man stands outside the river of time, so that he can anticipate his death either with hope or with melancholy. Also he can create. *He is not only a creature, but he is a creator* because he is not quite in the river of time; although he might forget how much of a creature he is when he begins to construct.³³

³⁰ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.77. Emphasis mine.

³¹ *Faith and History*, p.55. Emphasis mine.

³² *The Self and the Dramas of History*, p.45. Emphasis mine.

³³ "The Wheat and the Tares" in *Justice and Mercy*, pp.53f. Emphasis mine.

Niebuhr's sermon serves to illustrate the ability of the Christian faith to provide an adequate framework to understand this "fact of history". The doctrine of creation captures this tension between freedom and necessity in human history with its paradoxical conception of human beings as being made in the "image of God" and yet being "creatures".

To understand the paradoxical approach of Christian faith to the problem of human freedom and finiteness, it is necessary to set the doctrine of man as creature in juxtaposition to the doctrine of man as *imago Dei*.³⁴

While the notion of being made in the "image of God" offers no psychological elaboration, for Niebuhr it is clear that it does not make a sharp distinction between body and soul, nor soul and spirit; and as we saw in the previous section, spirit is not defined in rationalistic terms³⁵ but rather as self-transcendence. In *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, he turns to Augustine's discussion of self-transcendence and with him agrees that the idea of humanity being in the image of God "emphasizes the height of self-transcendence in man's spiritual stature".³⁶ This power of transcendence while not divine in itself, can only find a home in God, and it is this "vertical dimension" rather than any rational capacity that provides the basic ground for understanding the freedom within human nature.

Through this self-transcendence, the self has the freedom to stand outside of itself, to survey the world and others, and to conceive of and imagine other possibilities.

³⁴ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.166.

³⁵ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.152.

³⁶ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.150.

This is the freedom to create, to shape the necessities of nature, thus to make history.

Man's *freedom* is unique because it enables him, though in the temporal process, also to transcend it by conceptual knowledge, memory and self-determining will. Thus he creates a new level of coherence and meaning, which conforms neither to the world of natural change nor yet to the realm of pure Being in which Greek idealism sought refuge from the world of change. This is the realm of history.³⁷

While it provides a framework for understanding human freedom in history, the Christian doctrine of creation, however, also provides a framework for understanding the necessities of history, the "creatureliness of man". It

insists on man's weakness, dependence, and finiteness, on his involvement in the necessities and contingencies of the natural world, ...³⁸

The individual as both "spirit" and "nature" is created, and thus both elements are finite. The self remains the finite self even in the highest reaches of its self consciousness, and so experiences life at the crossroads between freedom and necessity. Human history therefore results from the freedom of the self as creator in tension with the necessities of the self as creature.

It is obvious that the self's freedom over natural process enables it to be a *creator of historical events*. Both its memory of past events and its capacity to project goals transcending the necessities of nature enable it to create the new level of reality which we know as human history. But the self is not simply a creator of this new dimension, for it is also a *creature of the web of events*, in the creation of which it participates.³⁹

³⁷ *Faith and History*, p.15. Emphasis mine.

³⁸ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.150.

³⁹ *The Self and the Dramas of History*, p.41. Emphasis mine.

Throughout his various writings then, we can see that Niebuhr is insistent that the "facts of history" make clear that history is a compound of freedom and necessity. Ignored by the false soteriologies, this is the second "fact" that has to be taken seriously by a true soteriology.

3.1.3. The Historical Self as the Sinful Self.

In our discussion of the false soteriologies we noted that they all have some awareness of evil in the human situation. Each one in offering its perception of salvation has a particular understanding of evil from which human beings are to be redeemed. For some we have seen that the body or the flesh is evil, for others the finiteness of human experience is evil, and for others a particular system or group of people is evil.

Because of this understanding of evil as something that can be clearly defined and avoided, all of the worldviews that Niebuhr discusses perceive redemption as a transcending or "getting away from" evil. In Hall's term, "salvation as resolution".⁴⁰ Hence we argued that the relationship between redemption and history is conceived as *liberation*.

Due to the previous two "facts of history" (i.e. the self as the unity of body and spirit, and history as a compound of freedom and necessity), Niebuhr is however very unhappy with this understanding of redemption as liberation, and thus we have chosen to categorize these worldviews as being *false soteriologies*.

⁴⁰ See our previous discussion. The reference is to Douglas Hall, "The Cross and Contemporary Culture" in R. Harries (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.198.

In the first instance Niebuhr felt that as history is a compound of freedom and necessity, there could be no pure freedom in history. Liberation in the sense of overcoming the "necessities" is thus an impossibility. As Gilkey puts it, "A stable, redeemed society seems inconceivable if history remains history".⁴¹

But, secondly, if Niebuhr is clear that there can be no pure "freedom" in history he is also clear that "necessity" is not itself evil. Niebuhr believed that the body or flesh is not itself evil, and neither is the experience of finiteness. The experience of the "the body" and of "finiteness" is simply a *human* experience, it is part of the "necessity" of history. As no ethical evaluation should be made of it it is not something from which we seek redemption.

Yet Niebuhr had a very strong sense of evil and more specifically of sin in human experience.⁴² And his understanding of evil or of sin diverged from the worldviews he criticized in that he chose not to identify sin with the body or with the natural self, but to locate it at the

⁴¹ Langdon Gilkey, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology of History" in N.S. Scott, Jr. (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.46.

⁴² Along with Karl Barth, Niebuhr is often credited with returning "sin" to theological discourse in the twentieth century. He was asked to write the entry on "Sin" in *A Handbook of Christian Theology*. A.A. Cohen and M. Halverson (Eds.), (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958). Hans Hofmann has written that sin is for him "the chief question of theology". *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), p.103. Emil Brunner comments that this "met with the complete approval from Niebuhr himself.... The Christian concept of sin is indeed one of the cornerstones of this structure of thought" in "Some Remarks on Reinhold Niebuhr's Work as a Christian Thinker" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.85. See also Ronald J. Feenstra, who writes: "Perhaps the centrepiece of Niebuhr's contribution to twentieth-century theology is his treatment of sin". *Op. cit.*, p.157.

junction of freedom and necessity.⁴³ And as this is the very stuff of history, for Niebuhr then, *the historical self is the sinful self*. Writing to a pacifist about the Second World War, he says:

Your difficulty is that you want to try and live in history without sinning. There is no such possibility in history.⁴⁴

In *The Nature and Destiny of Man* he reiterates:

Where there is history at all there is freedom, and where there is freedom there is sin.⁴⁵

In order to understand Niebuhr's contention that the historical self is the sinful self, it is important to understand Niebuhr's definition of sin. His is not a simple black-and-white contrast between "good" and "sin", but rather a sensitive appraisal of human nature and the "facts of history" which takes seriously sin's relationship to human anxiety, creativity and temptation.

Niebuhr argues that living in history, in the intersection between freedom and necessity, the self is *anxious*.⁴⁶ This anxiety arises because human beings as finite creatures are bound to the limitations and necessities of life, and yet as partakers in freedom and the transcendence of the spirit can survey their life and sense something greater than the present.

⁴³ Niebuhr writes: "... both freedom and necessity, both man's involvement in nature and his transcendence over it must be regarded as important elements in the situation which tempts to sin." *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.181.

⁴⁴ "An Open Letter to Richard Roberts" in *Love and Justice*, p.270.

⁴⁵ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.80.

⁴⁶ The debt to Kierkegaard is acknowledged by Niebuhr on this issue: "Kierkegaard's analysis of the relation of anxiety to sin is the profoundest in Christian thought". *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.182n.

Anxiety is the inevitable concomitant of the paradox of freedom and finiteness in which man is involved. Anxiety is the internal precondition for sin. It is the inevitable spiritual state of man standing in the paradoxical situation of freedom and finiteness.⁴⁷

While "anxiety is the internal precondition for sin", it is not itself sinful. All human beings are anxious, and anxiety is the basis of creativity. The advances in human history occur through human anxiety in the present and the determination to transcend it in the future. But the anxiety caused by this tension between the self as transcendent and the self as finite creature is the grounds of temptation:

But what is the situation which is the occasion of temptation? Is it not the fact that man is a finite spirit, lacking identity with the whole, but yet a spirit capable in some sense of envisaging the whole, so that he easily commits the error of imagining himself the whole which he envisages?⁴⁸

Because anxiety is both the source of creativity and temptation, sin lies not in just one part of human nature - in "nature" or in "spirit", but in the very intersection of the two; in a paradoxical relationship which cannot be overcome without at the same time overcoming any possibility for human creativeness. But it also means that temptation is very close to creativity in that it is the creative moment in which the temptation to deny the limits of human freedom is the strongest.⁴⁹

We are now able to understand Niebuhr's various definitions of sin in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*:

⁴⁷ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.182.

⁴⁸ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.181.

⁴⁹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.186. "Creativity is therefore always corrupted by some effort to overcome contingency by raising precisely what is contingent to absolute and unlimited dimensions."

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.⁵⁰

Sin is thus the unwillingness of man to acknowledge his creatureliness and dependence upon God and his effort to make his own life independent and secure.⁵¹

Human life points beyond itself. But it must not make itself into that beyond. That were to commit the basic sin of man.⁵²

These three statements point out the consistent approach to sin in Niebuhr's thought: *Temptation* is the anxious condition that accompanies the tension in human nature between freedom and finitude; *sin* is the collapse of that tension in the inevitable, though not necessary, claim of universal and transcendent meaning for a contingent, limited, and historically relative action.

Writing some years earlier in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, Niebuhr puts it thus:

Man makes pretensions of being absolute in his finiteness. He tries to translate his finite existence into a more permanent and absolute form of existence. Ideally men seek to subject their arbitrary and contingent existence under the dominion of absolute reality. But practically they always mix the finite with the eternal and claim for themselves, their nation, their culture, or their class the centre of existence....

But man is destined, both by the imperfection of his knowledge and by his desire to overcome his finiteness to make absolute claims for his partial and finite values. He tries in short to make himself God.⁵³

Niebuhr is clear that Biblical faith expresses this perspective on sin.⁵⁴ It does not locate sin in the fact of

⁵⁰ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.16.

⁵¹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, pp.137f.

⁵² *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.158.

⁵³ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.95.

⁵⁴ In response to a criticism of Niebuhr's use of the term "biblical view of sin", Niebuhr writes: "there is, in fact, a subordinate dualism

human finiteness but rather in the tendency to deny finiteness by overstepping the mark in human freedom. It is "the consequence of man's inclination to usurp the prerogatives of God".⁵⁵

He illustrates this in a sermon on "The Tower of Babel":

..... Every civilization and every culture is thus a Tower of Babel.

The pretensions of human cultures and civilizations are the natural consequence of a profound and ineradicable difficulty in all human spirituality. Man is mortal. That is his fate. Man pretends not to be mortal. That is his sin.⁵⁶

As Niebuhr expresses his understanding of sin the note of human pretension is a pointer to choice. In the temptation that arises with the experience of anxiety, human beings do not have to "pretend not to be mortal". Yet for Niebuhr, it is one of the "facts of history" that time and again they do so because of a prior and more fundamental sin: a lack of trust and faith in God.⁵⁷ This prior broken relationship with God is for him the meaning of original sin.⁵⁸ The anxious self can escape finiteness by a

in the history of Christian thought which attributes evil to the body and regards ascetic flagellations of physical passion as means of salvation. Professor Burttt thinks this dualism is derived from the Pauline concept of the "flesh warring against the spirit." I think he is in error in this contention. At least the best Biblical scholarship seems agreed that Paul means by 'carnally minded' the self seeking itself.... In think there is a consistent interpretation of sin the Bible from the story of the Fall through the prophets to the Pauline definition in Romans I." "Reply to interpretation and criticism" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.525.

⁵⁵ *Faith and History*, p.121.

⁵⁶ "The Tower of Babel" in *Beyond Tragedy*, p.28.

⁵⁷ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.254. "Sin can never be traced merely to the temptation arising from a particular situation or condition in which man as man finds himself or in which particular men find themselves. Nor can the temptation which is compounded of a situation of finiteness and freedom, plus the fact of sin, be regarded as leading necessarily to sin in the life of each individual, if again sin is not first presupposed in that life."

⁵⁸ We should however note that while Niebuhr claims his view to be the orthodox Christian view, he is constantly critical of the way mainstream

"qualitative development" of life through a relationship with God and in "obedient subjection to the will of God".⁵⁹ For it to choose the "quantitative" development of trying to escape finiteness by claiming transcendence presupposes, therefore, the prior state of unbelief. "The sin of the inordinate self-love thus points to the prior sin of lack of trust in God".⁶⁰

However far back one goes in history, the paradox of the fact that sin would not exist if it were not already introduced in the lack of trust in and relatedness to God, is the essence of the doctrine of original sin.

Man's situation tempts to evil, provided man is unwilling to accept the peculiar weakness of his creaturely life, and is unable to find the ultimate source and end of his existence beyond himself. *It is man's unbelief and pride which tempt to sin.*

This, then, is the real mystery of evil; that it presupposes itself. No matter how far back it is traced in the individual or the race, or even preceding the history of the race, a profound scrutiny of the nature of evil reveals that there is an element of sin in the temptation which leads to sin; and that without this presupposed evil, the consequent sin would not necessarily arise from the situation in which man finds himself.⁶¹

For Niebuhr, this is what the story of the "Fall of Adam" is seeking to show. *Justitia originalis* is located in self-transcendence,⁶² and in this self-transcendence Adam

Christian faith has understood Original sin, and "The Fall". His is a highly original way of dealing with this central theme in theology.

⁵⁹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.251.

⁶⁰ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.252.

⁶¹ "Mystery and Meaning" in *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, p.143.

⁶² *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, pp.277f. "The self in the moment of transcending itself exercises the self's capacity for infinite regression and makes the previous concretion of will its object. It is in this moment of self-transcendence that the consciousness and memory of original perfection arise... The consciousness of original perfection is not in some universal self in distinction to an empirical self. There are obviously not simply two selves in conflict with each other. But in every moment of existence there is a tension between the

experienced *original righteousness*. In other words he could survey himself and his actions from a sinless perspective. But as soon as he sought to act within the confines of both the freedom and necessities of history, he became guilty of sin.

Adam was sinless before he acted, and sinful in his first recorded action. His sinlessness, in other words, preceded his first significant action and his sinfulness came to light in that action. This is a symbol for the whole of human history.⁶³

What Niebuhr means by this is that there was no historical state of perfection in which Adam (and presumably Eve) lived prior to the fall.⁶⁴ Their perfection - *justitia originalis* - had to do with Adam's self-consciousness prior to his historical action. Thus for Niebuhr the story of the fall has to do not with the origins of evil but with its nature,⁶⁵ and so the story as a "myth"⁶⁶ about human nature points out that every self may be perfect and sinless prior to acting in history, but the moment the self becomes the historical self it finds itself sinning.

The perfection before the fall is an ideal possibility which men can comprehend but not realize. The perfection before the fall is, in a sense, the perfection before the act.⁶⁷

self as it looks out upon the world from the perspective of its values and necessities and the self as it looks at both the world and itself and is disquieted by the undue claims of the self in action."

⁶³ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.280.

⁶⁴ He writes "Protestantism has been betrayed into this error partly by its literalism, by which it defines the Fall as a historic event and "perfection before the Fall" as a perfection existing in a historical epoch before the Fall. When Luther essays to define this perfection he indulges in all kinds of fantastic nonsense". "Christian Faith and Natural Law" in *Love and Justice*, p.51.

⁶⁵ "The myth of the Fall is made into an account of the origin of evil when it is really a description of its nature". *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.100.

⁶⁶ See our discussion on the place of myth in Niebuhr's theological method in the first chapter.

⁶⁷ "As deceivers yet true" in *Beyond Tragedy*, p.12.

And again elsewhere:

The perfection before the Fall is always an ideal possibility before the act. It describes a dimension of human existence rather than a period of history.⁶⁸

While this doctrine of original sin asserts that sin is inevitable, it also holds the paradoxical assertion that humans are nevertheless responsible for their sin.

Temptation arises in the tension between freedom and finitude and human sin always arises therefore within human freedom. If human freedom were denied, so too would the possibility of temptation and sin. The inevitable claiming of universal significance for finite being is done within human freedom, and while it is therefore inevitable, humans are nevertheless responsible for sin:

The Christian doctrine of original sin with its seemingly contradictory assertion about the inevitability of sin and man's responsibility for it is a dialectical truth which does justice to the fact that man's self love and self-centeredness is inevitable, but not in such a way as to fit into the category of natural necessity. It is within and by his freedom that man sins.⁶⁹

What Niebuhr's understanding of sin makes clear is that human sin is not due to human finitude, but rather to human freedom. Because in self-transcendent freedom human beings can survey their particular and limited actions and ascribe universal and infinite meaning to them, Niebuhr is clear that the root of sin is in the spirit rather than in the body.

The root of sin is in spirit and not in nature...
It is precisely because he is free to centre his life in certain physical processes and to lift

⁶⁸ "Christian Faith and Natural Law" in *Love and Justice*, p.51.

⁶⁹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.263.

them out of the harmonious relationships in which nature has them, that man falls into sin.⁷⁰

The primary outworking of sin in human life is in the form of *pride*. Niebuhr spells out his basic definition of sin in different areas of human activity when he speaks of four types of pride.⁷¹ (i) Pride of power is exhibited when the ego assumes self mastery, or on the other hand when the ego from a position of weakness, grasps for more power to make itself secure; (ii) intellectual pride arises when human knowledge is taken out of its temporal and limited realm and is asserted to be final and ultimate; (iii) moral pride is ascribing universal significance to one's self-righteous judgements; and (iv) spiritual pride makes the self-deification of moral pride explicit so that religious assertions can in fact be the height of sin.

While to a large extent Niebuhr has been describing the sin of pride from an individual perspective, we must note his discussion on the nature of collectives in which he points out that some distinctions between collective and individual behaviour must be made:

The group is more arrogant, hypocritical, self-centered and more ruthless in the pursuit of its ends than the individual.⁷²

Niebuhr argues that the will-to-survive is easily transmuted into the will-to-power, and the lust-for-power, pride, contempt toward the other, hypocrisy and "finally the claim of moral autonomy by which the self-deification of the social group is made explicit by its presentation of itself

⁷⁰ "The Fulfillment of Life" in *Beyond Tragedy*, p.295.

⁷¹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, pp.188-203.

⁷² *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.208.

as the source and end of existence".⁷³ This "pretending to be God" is the ultimate expression of collective sin and is a greater source of conflict and injustice than individual pride.

While Niebuhr sees sin primarily as pride (i.e. trying to escape from finitude), he points out that anxiety can also lead to the sin of *sensuality* which is the attempt to escape from freedom:

Man ... falls into sensuality when he seeks to escape from his unlimited possibilities of freedom from the perils and responsibilities of self-determination, by immersing himself into a "mutable good" by loosing himself in some natural vitality.⁷⁴

In a discussion on sensuality as exhibited in sexual passion, Niebuhr points out that sensuality is always (i) a final form of self love; (ii) an escape from self to deifying a process or another outside of the self; (ii) or an escape from both forms of idolatry "into some form of subconscious existence".⁷⁵

Niebuhr's understanding of sin has received much attention from critics, particularly his overwhelming focus on pride. Feminists have been correct in pointing out that this is really the dominant "male" sin whereas women need to learn to *have pride*. Daphne Hampson puts it like this:

For the woman, by contrast, the failure is a failure to come to herself, and so she wishes to be rid of herself by losing herself in another. Far from having an inflated self, she has hardly begun to find herself. Far from being an isolated, self-sufficient individual, she has abnegated responsibility for herself. *It is then wide of the mark to prescribe for her that she*

⁷³ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.211.

⁷⁴ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.186.

⁷⁵ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.240.

*should forgo her pride, or that she should stop exploiting others and start serving them.*⁷⁶

In a similar manner, others have pointed out that this focus on pride is really a focus from the perspective of a first-world, white, U.S.A. community rather than for an oppressed community. "He is a remarkable analyst of the sins of the strong" says John Bennett.⁷⁷ Most critics do recognize that Niebuhr had another underdeveloped side to sin - sensuality - but that he subordinated it to pride. It is suggested that had this been developed it could have given Niebuhr a more integrated theology. This much is clear.

Our typology of false soteriologies, however, helps us see an important reason why Niebuhr concentrated on sin as pride to the detriment of sin as sensuality, and integrates our discussion on sin with our broader concern. The sin of sensuality is central to the denial of history, and while this was an important concern for Niebuhr, he never considered it a dominant type of worldview. On the other hand, the sin of the *worship* and *completing* of history is the sin of pride. Against this Niebuhr had much to say, and so it assumed an importance in his thinking. In a different

⁷⁶ Daphne Hampson, "Reinhold Niebuhr on Sin: A Critique" in R. Harries (Ed.), *op. cit.* p.49. Emphasis mine. See also Judith Plaskow, *op. cit.*: "It is ironic in retrospect that Niebuhr wanted to relate his doctrine of sin "to the observable behaviour of *men*" and that all his examples of sinful pride are either individual men or male-governed nations". p.68. See her discussion in pp.62-72, and 149ff.

⁷⁷ John Bennett in "The Contribution of Reinhold Niebuhr", in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Vol 24 No.1, 1968. p.8. "Niebuhr keeps pointing to the endless greed, the never-satisfied will to power, the imperialism, the pride, the massive pretensions of the world's great men and especially of great nations and empires". Judith Plaskow refers to Robert Raines' critique of Niebuhr: "His analysis of pride is helpful in understanding neither the revolutions of oppressed people, nor the whole trend toward conformity and abdication of responsibility in modern culture." In *op. cit.*, p.68.

context the *denial* of history may be more of a temptation, and sensuality would then assume a greater emphasis.

In sum: The historical self, caught in the paradox of spirit and body, self-transcendence and finiteness, and freedom and necessity is thus the sinful self given over to pride or sensuality. Driven by anxiety with its situation it seeks to make absolute and universal claims about its weaknesses and limited perspectives, or it seeks to deny its freedom. It cannot act in history without being sinful.

For Niebuhr then the third "fact of history" that a true soteriology will have to take seriously is that the historical self is the sinful self.

3.1.4. Liberation as a Denial of the "Facts of History".

As we saw in his critique of the modern belief in progress, Niebuhr felt that history did not get progressively better and better, but that it continued to exhibit the same paradoxes, ironies and ambiguities at each level of its expression. *Because of the freedom that exists in history, human beings are free to be both creative and destructive.* This is a crucial point that Niebuhr feels is overlooked by other worldviews:

The deficiency of both bourgeois and Marxist social theory in estimating the indeterminate possibilities of historic vitalities, as they express themselves in both individual and collective terms, is derived from their common effort to understand man without considering the final dimension of his spirit: his transcendent freedom over both the natural and the historical process in which he is involved. *This freedom*

*accounts for both the creative and destructive possibilities in human history.*⁷⁸

In his discussion on human nature Niebuhr is therefore at pains to establish the fact over against other worldviews that human creativity is not just a product of the spirit or destructiveness of the body, but that all four elements in human nature (vitality and form in body and spirit) are involved in making history whether this is creative or destructive:

All these four factors are involved in human creativity and by implication in human destructiveness.⁷⁹

In their limited focus upon specific forms of evil, this is often overlooked by the other worldviews:

The two-fold possibility of creativity and destruction in human freedom accounts for the growth of both good and evil through the extension of human powers. The failure to recognize this obvious fact in modern culture accounts for most of its errors in estimating the actual trends of history.⁸⁰

And in *The Self and the Dramas of History*:

It is always the whole man who is involved in both creativity and destructiveness, in both self-regard and the sense of obligation to his fellows. It is the whole man who rides the forward march of history and exhibits capacities for both good and evil on every level of culture and civilization.⁸¹

And in sermon form in "Be Not Anxious":

⁷⁸ *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, pp.59f. Emphasis mine.

⁷⁹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.27. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁰ *Faith and History*, pp.122f. Emphasis mine. The reference begins: "The discovery of specific causes of specific forms of these evils has obscured and will continue to obscure the profounder truth, that all men, saints and sinners, the righteous and the unrighteous, are inclined to use the freedom to transcend time, history and themselves in such a way as to make themselves the false centre of existence. Thus the same freedom which gives human life a creative power, not possessed by the other creatures, also endows it with destructive possibilities not known in nature."

⁸¹ *The Self and the Dramas of History*, p.158. Emphasis mine.

We now know what we should have always known, that technical progress increases the scope of man's power over nature, but that all human power contains potentialities both of creativity and of destructiveness.⁸²

Because for Niebuhr the historical self is the sinful self, the self will always be seeking to use its freedom to its own ends. For example, the creativity of love can easily be turned by the freedom of the spirit to the destructiveness of self-love. Likewise, the creativity of the will-to-live can easily be turned into the destructiveness of the will-to-power.

There is no way of transcending this in history, for the same freedom that is creative can also be destructive. To eliminate the freedoms that are destructive can only mean the elimination of all freedoms, and then history would cease to be, as by definition history is a compound of both necessity and freedom.

Likewise, in our discussion of sin we noted that sin is rooted in spirit rather than in nature. It is the same self-transcendent spirit that characterizes human love, hope and faith that over-reaches itself in negating its finitude and ultimately claiming to be God. There can be no end to this sinfulness of the spirit, without putting an end to its self-transcendence, and thus destroying the very grounds for human being.

For Niebuhr, therefore, human history is always caught in the ambiguity of creativity and destructiveness. Perhaps the best illustration of what this means for Niebuhr is in his discussion of how communities of people actually live

⁸² "Be Not Anxious" in *Justice and Mercy*, p.81. Emphasis mine.

together in history, and cope with the struggles of the sinful self.

Here we must note the continued importance of the thesis that Niebuhr first established in his book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*.

A sharp distinction must be drawn between the moral and social behaviour of individuals and of social groups, national, racial, and economic; and that this distinction justifies and necessitates political policies which a purely individualist ethic must always find embarrassing.... In every human group there is less reason to guide and to check impulse, less capacity for self-transcendence, less ability to comprehend the needs of others and therefore more unrestrained egoism than the individuals who compose the group reveal in their personal relationships.⁸³

In his 1960 preface to the book, Niebuhr makes clear that he still stands by this thesis,⁸⁴ and this is perhaps the one part of this book that he returns to in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*.

In his discussion on the "Kingdom of God and the Struggle for Justice" in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, Niebuhr reiterates what he had established in the earlier work, viz. that human community is not a simple construction of conscience or reason, but is held together by power.⁸⁵ Power ensures justice, but paradoxically it is the same power that causes injustice. No human community can therefore escape the ambiguity of creativity and destructiveness, and as with individuals there is no possibility of the group achieving the law of love:

⁸³ *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p.xi.

⁸⁴ *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p.xi.

⁸⁵ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.257.

There is, therefore, no historic structure of justice which can either fulfill the law of love or rest content in its inability to do so.⁸⁶

Even primitive communities must exhibit this tension, and hence their relationships cannot be innocent.⁸⁷

This was also part of the thesis of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*:⁸⁸

The hope that there will ever be an ideal society, in which every one can take without restraint from the common social process "according to his need," completely disregards the limitations of human nature.⁸⁹

And in *Faith and History* with reference to the compound of freedom and necessity in history he writes:

History is, for this reason, not a realm of indeterminate growth and development. It is a realm of conflict. In this conflict new forces and forms of life challenged the established powers and orders. They are a reminder to the established forms and powers of the contingent character of all historic configurations and a judgement upon the pretension which denies this contingency.⁹⁰

We are now at the point that we can understand that for Niebuhr - given the fact that history is a compound of

⁸⁶ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.296.

⁸⁷ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.79.

⁸⁸ In the introduction he writes: ...the limitations of the human imagination, the easy subservience of reason to prejudice and passion, and the consequent persistence of irrational egoism, particularly in group behaviour, make social conflict an inevitability in human history, probably to its very end. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p.xx.

⁸⁹ *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p.196.

⁹⁰ *Faith and History*, p.224. In *The Irony of American History*, pp.2f. Niebuhr reflects upon the ambiguities of the U.S.A. in the world's history in similar terms: "Our dreams of bringing the whole of human history under the control of the human will are ironically refuted by the fact that no group of idealists can easily move the pattern of history toward the desired goal of peace and justice. The recalcitrant forces in the historical drama have a power and persistence beyond our reckoning. Our own nation, always a vivid symbol of the most characteristic attitudes of a bourgeois culture, is less potent to do what it wants in the hour of its greatest strength than it was in the days of its infancy. The infant is more secure in his world than the mature man is in his wider world. The pattern of the historical drama grows more quickly than the strength of even the most powerful man or nation.

freedom and necessity, that the historical self is the sinful self, and that due to sin, the experience of freedom gives to history possibilities for both creativity and destruction - that *liberation* cannot be the answer to the question of human destiny. Human beings cannot exist save in history and thus be subject to its ambiguities. And these ambiguities, writes Niebuhr,

will always prevent that simple social harmony which is the utopia of both democratic and communist idealists.⁹¹

Those soteriologies which offer liberation either through denying history, worshipping history, or completing history are therefore false.

The final form of the modern error about history is the belief that man's ambiguous position as both a creature and a creator of history is gradually changed until he may, in the foreseeable future, become the unequivocal master of historical destiny.⁹²

In the light of the three central "facts of history" that Niebuhr brought to bear in his criticism of the "false-soteriologies" liberation is not possible:

Man, as the creature of both necessity and freedom, must, like Moses, always perish outside the promised land. He can see what he cannot reach.⁹³

But there is yet more than this. Niebuhr not only felt that this conception of Liberation denied the central "facts of history", but was itself symptomatic of the problem of sinfulness in history, and so in the end could not possibly offer redemption from sin but only cause further sin through

⁹¹ *The Irony of American History*, p.84.

⁹² *Faith and History*, pp.70f.

⁹³ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.90.

its pride. This is what makes all the redemptive schemes of the *worship and completing* of history false.

The modern version of an historical redemption from the human predicament of finiteness and freedom is, in short, a particularly flagrant expression of the *Hybris* which tempts man to overestimate the degree of his freedom and which Christian thought recognizes as the root of sin.⁹⁴

And we would want to add that the other version of redemption - the *denial* of history - tempts human beings to underestimate the degree of freedom, and thus to the sin of sensuality.

Liberation cannot come through the *denial of history* because the self is a unity of body and spirit, and cannot exist outside of history. And through participating in the freedom and necessity of history, the historical self is the sinful self. Neither body nor spirit can inhabit a "sinless" realm. To seek liberation outside of history, thus means to destroy the self and all forms of ethical responsibility. It proclaims salvation unchallenged by God's love.

Liberation cannot come through the *worshipping of history* because history, being a compound of freedom and necessity gives rise to both creative and destructive impulses. The self who seeks to guide history towards greater and greater freedom is also the sinful self, and is thus always carrying the very "burden" from which it seeks liberation. It proclaims salvation outside of God's mercy.

Finally, Liberation cannot come through the *completing of history*, because the self cannot exist outside of

⁹⁴ *Faith and History*, p.85.

history. So long as it is within history the self remains the sinful self. The claim to have achieved liberation is always a self-righteous impossibility. It proclaims salvation unjudged by God's *righteousness*.⁹⁵

And so in the end, Niebuhr is cutting in his rejection of the false "schemes of world redemption", the false-soteriologies. Not only have they failed to understand the "facts of history", but their very desire to offer hopes of redemption in willful denial of these facts is illustrative of the whole problem of sin and redemption:

The modern interpretation of human life and history was a highly plausible evasion of some very inconvenient and embarrassing facts about human nature. It was an evasion both of the dimension of responsibility in human nature and of the fact of guilt.

The whole structure of the modern interpretation of life and history was, in short, a very clever contrivance of human pride to obscure the weakness and the insecurity of man; of the human conscience to hide the sin into which men fall through their efforts to override their weakness and insecurity; and of human sloth to evade responsibility.⁹⁶

And so surveying these failures of the "false soteriologies" in the light of the "facts of history", Niebuhr is moved to reflect upon this constant human search for redemption and to comment:

There is a profound pathos in these failures. They prove that ... the ultimate form of sin is a corruption of man's quest for redemption.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Or as Niebuhr prefers, God's *justice*. (See the note at the end of chapter two).

⁹⁶ *Faith and History*, p.99.

⁹⁷ *Faith and History*, p.205. In this instance he is referring to Catholic and Calvinist theocratic experiments, but as we have seen these are merely religious counterparts of secular worldviews which exhibit the same false soteriological options.

3.2. True Redemption Through the Atonement of Christ.

We have now examined Niebuhr's perspective upon human nature and the "facts of history", and identified the sin from which humans need to be redeemed. In this section we shall examine in detail Niebuhr's understanding of the doctrine of the Atonement.¹

We start with the Biblical tradition of the prophets, through whom Niebuhr approaches the doctrine of the Atonement (3.2.1.). This brings us to the doctrine proper, and we deal with some of the more technical aspects (3.2.2.), before turning to Niebuhr's formulation of the doctrine under the headings of the Cross as wisdom and truth (3.2.3.), and the Cross as grace and power (3.2.4.). In the next section (3.3.), we will lay out the relationship of the doctrine of the Atonement to the practice of justice. We trust in this way to give full meaning to Niebuhr's conviction that true redemption comes through the Atonement of Christ.

3.2.1. The Prophetic Identification of the Problem.

It was the Hebrew prophets, argued Niebuhr, who were the first to identify the key issue in the problem of human nature and destiny in the light of the facts of history. And because the Atonement of Christ can only be understood

¹ In doing so we are forced to rely almost exclusively on the two books in which Niebuhr gave the formal development of the doctrine of Atonement his attention, viz. *The Nature and Destiny of Man* and *Faith and History*.

from the perspective of this Jewish tradition, Niebuhr thus pays it attention when seeking to explore the doctrine of the Atonement:

The prophets of the Old Testament correctly measured the moral problem of life in its dimensions of both height and breadth. They discerned that man, in his individual and collective experience is finally confronted by the divine source and end of his existence...²

For Niebuhr, the Hebrew prophets are the first to discern that human destiny, the relationship of salvation to history, must be sought in relation to God's *righteousness*, God's *mercy*, and God's *love*.

Attentive to the God of the covenant who had brought their forebears out of Egypt, the Jews sought to make sense out of their pressing historical problems caused by the struggle between good and evil. As we saw in our discussion of Messianic sects above, the hope of redemption was often expressed in a form of "egoistic-nationalistic" Messianism, in which the Jews would triumph over their enemies. This was not unique to the Jews, for as we have seen it is common in all hopes of liberation:³ Yet, Niebuhr argues, one of the most significant aspects of Jewish religious thought was the transcending of this nationalistic expectation by the "ethical-universalistic" recognition that the problem of history was not solved by the victory of "our" nation or tribe, but rather by the victory of the "good" from any nation or tribe.

² *Faith and History*, p.132.

³ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.16. "Every Messianic expectation contains an explicit or implicit assumption that history will be fulfilled from the particular locus of the civilization and culture which has the expectation."

This "ethical-universalistic" Messianism expressed itself as the hope for the coming of a "shepherd king",⁴ a hope which Niebuhr saw as expressing the recognition that power (the king) was needed to create the good (shepherd) society. So for Niebuhr, this Messianic hope recognized that the tension in human history was not between goodness and power, but rather between good power and bad power,⁵ and hence it hopes for the coming of the shepherd king, the figure of good power.

This shepherd king, the figure of good-power is usually understood as some transcendent being, a divine figure who comes to rule as king, establishing a government of peace and justice. Yet, as Niebuhr notes, this interpretation of history was too profound to allow the hope of a Messianic shepherd king to suffice. For the ambiguity of power in history cannot be overcome even by a God who enters history. To establish goodness implies power, but the same power is the root of both justice and injustice.

Perfect goodness in history can only be symbolized by the disavowal of power.⁶

The Messianic expectation of perfect power being combined with perfect justice was thus doomed to defeat.⁷

⁴ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.19. Niebuhr notes, further that this was an important symbol for the Babylonians and Egyptians as well as for the Jews.

⁵ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.21. "It recognizes that injustice flows from the same source from which justice comes, from the historical organization of life... The very power which organizes human society and establishes justice, also generates injustice by its preponderance of power."

⁶ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.22.

⁷ *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, p.122. "Always in human history the same power which maintained order in the world also introduced injustice into the order, by reason of the selfish use which the king made of his power. How could history finally culminate in a reign of perfect righteousness except by a divine king who would combine justice with

For Niebuhr, it was not this ethical-universalism, however, that the great Hebrew prophets bequeathed to the Judeo-Christian tradition, but rather a criticism of optimistic Messianism,⁸ and its hope that God will vindicate the "good" in some coming kingly reign.⁹ The key issue here is the recognition that in the face of God's *righteousness*, there is no historical individual or group who can claim to be righteous.¹⁰

So the prophets did not interpret history from the hope of a coming king, but rather from the expectation of a coming judgement on all people, including the chosen people. There are none who are good enough to escape the "Day of the Lord":

God's word is spoken against both his favoured nation and against all nations. The real problem

absolute power? This was the expectation of the. The expectation was doomed to disappointment."

⁸ See *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, pp.24ff.

⁹ In *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr argues that this is really the beginning of revelation in the history of religion. "...it will become apparent that Hebraic Prophetism is not so much the triumph of universalism in the history of ethics as the beginning of revelation in the history of religion. It is the beginning of revelation because here, for the first time, in the history of culture the eternal and divine is not regarded as the extension and fulfillment of the highest human possibilities." *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.25. By the time he wrote *Faith and History*, however, he sees the roots of this approach to history and beginning of revelation in the "act of grace" implied in God choosing Israel, an approach "which the prophets did not invent, though they interpreted and reinterpreted it". He goes on to make the point: "The idea of God choosing Israel as an act of grace, since Israel had no power of virtue to merit the choice, represents a radical break in the history of culture. It is, in a genuine sense, the beginning of revelation.." *Faith and History*, pp.103f.

¹⁰ *Faith and History*, pp.104f. This idea "lays the foundation for the conception of the complexity of history. It calls attention to the fact that the human agents do not simply conform to the divine will in history; but that they defy the divine purpose, precisely because they identify their purpose and power too simply with the divine purpose. Thereby the creativity of human freedom is turned into destructiveness. If there is a pattern and meaning in the historical drama it must be worked out against this human rebellion, which sows confusion into the order of history and makes its final end dubious."

of history is the proud pretension of all human endeavours, which seeks to obscure their finite and partial character and thereby involves history in evil and sin.¹¹

Unlike Messianism which has as its end a "golden age", Prophetism recognizes that the historical self is the sinful self, and that all history and human endeavour is in rebellion to God,¹² and thus any future Messianic kingdom would still be subject to God's judgement. The meaning of history, wrought through with sin, is therefore condemnation.

This ultimate problem is given by the fact that human history stands in contradiction to the divine will on any level of its moral and religious achievements in such a way that in any "final" judgement the righteous are proved not to be righteous.¹³

Niebuhr goes on to ask that if the historical self is the sinful self, and history stands under judgement and condemnation from God, then "where do we find the meaning of history?" and how is "the evil in every good and the unrighteousness of the righteous is to be overcome"?¹⁴

The answer to this "final enigma of history"¹⁵ lies through resources in God other than his judgement. The "evil in every good and the unrighteousness of the righteous" can only be overcome by God's mercy.

The problem of history, according to prophetism, is not that God should be revealed as strong enough to overcome the defiance of the evil

¹¹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.25.

¹² *Faith and History*, p.132. "The experience of being confronted by the divine source "inevitably contains the contrite sense of being judged. The conscience is guilty because the individual or the nation is discovered in this final experience of faith and revelation to be involved in a defiance of God by reason of its pride and self-seeking."

¹³ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.43.

¹⁴ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.43.

¹⁵ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.43.

against his will; but as having *resources of mercy* great enough to redeem as well as to judge men.¹⁶

The implication of this is of course that history cannot find its meaning in history itself. Prophetic Messianism identifies the problem of history in a way that cannot be solved by history, but only by the intervention of God. Yet, what is also clear is that this meaning, while it may transcend history must at the same time have to do with history, for that is where human beings live and where God's righteousness and mercy call them to love. Each individual

is involved in the historical process. In so far as he is involved in history, the disclosure of life's meaning must come to him in history...¹⁷

And so the prophets call us to love.

The prophets believe that God's judgements are executed in history. That confidence establishes the moral meaning of history.¹⁸

Now for Niebuhr, we cannot understand the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ save against this background in the Jewish religious tradition. In a Palm Sunday sermon he lays out the difference between Jewish expectations and Jesus' own mission, and locates Jesus in the Prophetic Messianic tradition we have identified above. Here he argues that the difference between the first day (Palm Sunday) and the fifth day of Holy week (Good Friday) symbolizes the difference between the "old and new Hebraic religions".

The old religion tried to solve the problem of the moral ambiguity of the historical process by projecting a Messianic age in which all ambiguity would be eliminated by the triumph of justice over injustice.

The new religion, despite the idea of a suffering Messiah rather than a triumphant one,

¹⁶ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, pp.29f. Emphasis mine.

¹⁷ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.36.

¹⁸ *Faith and History*, p.126.

also had many Messianic moods and movements... even though the clear meaning of the suffering servant, as Jesus interpreted it, was that *history reached its climax of meaning, not in the triumph of good over evil, but in the contrite awareness that all men, good and evil, must be reconciled to God.*¹⁹

And so Niebuhr argues that Jesus consciously rejected a number of possibilities in his mission including Hebraic legalism, nationalistic particularism and even Hebraic Messianism, and chooses instead to locate himself within the tradition of "Prophetism" or Prophetic Messianism as we have understood it above.²⁰ He embodied the Prophetic truth that before God's *righteousness* there are no righteous, and that God's *mercy* alone pronounces righteousness and calls us to a life lived in love.

For this message Jesus was rejected. Yet in that rejection lies the heart of his message. Jesus goes further than either Messianism and Prophetism in proclaiming a *suffering* messiah. For a people expecting a triumphant Messiah this was a great outrage. And the further fact that Jesus identified himself as this suffering messiah, as the one from God, was even more of an outrage.²¹

Yet Jesus' teaching is clear that in his ministry and suffering the truth about God, about human history, and about redemption has been revealed:

It is the vicarious suffering of the representative of God, and not of some force in history, which finally clarifies the obscurities

¹⁹ "The Son of Man must Suffer" in *Justice and Mercy*, p.86f.

²⁰ See the discussion in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, pp.39-46.

²¹ See "The Power and Weakness of God" in *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, p.124: "Christ is thus doubly an offence to the common sense of mankind. He possesses no royal trappings of power and no divine symbols of omnipotence. He is an offence also because he convicts the righteous as well as the unrighteous by his impotent goodness."

of history and discloses the sovereignty of God over history.²²

Indeed the suffering on the Cross becomes the key to unlock the meaning of human destiny for "the Christian faith regards this scene at the Cross as an ultimate point of illumination on the character of man and of God".²³ To a fuller consideration of the meaning of the Cross we must now turn.

3.2.2. Salvation in Search of Doctrine.

At the heart of this thesis is the contention that the question of human destiny understood as the search for redemption, is the central interpretive key for understanding the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, and that furthermore, the Christian doctrine of the Atonement is for him the principle for gaining a true understanding of human experience and destiny. That this is a fundamental truth for Niebuhr is indicated by the following statements taken from works that span many years.

In 1937 in *Beyond Tragedy* he writes:

But the fact is that the atoning death of Christ is the revelation of ultimate reality which may become the principle of interpretation for all human experience...

Most profoundly the atonement of Christ is a revelation of what life actually is.²⁴

In 1941, in the first volume of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* he states:

The doctrine of the Atonement and justification is the "stone which the builders rejected", and must

²² *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.45.

²³ "The Power and Weakness of God" in *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, p.124.

²⁴ *Beyond Tragedy*, pp.19f. Emphasis mine.

be made the "head of the corner". It is an *absolutely essential presupposition* for the understanding of human nature and human history.²⁵

Then in 1943 in the second volume of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, in which he most clearly articulates and interprets the doctrine of the Atonement, Niebuhr puts it:

The Christian doctrine of the Atonement, with its paradoxical conception of the relation of the divine mercy to the divine wrath is therefore the *final key to his historical interpretation...*

... it is the *beginning of wisdom* in the sense that it contains symbolically all that the Christian faith maintains about what man ought to do and what he cannot do, about his obligations and final incapacity to fulfill them, about the importance of decisions and achievements in history and about their final insignificance.²⁶

A few years later in a sermon reflecting upon the passion of Christ he says:

The meaning of the Cross is its revelation of the fact that the final power of God over man is derived from the self-imposed weakness of His love. This self-imposed weakness does not derogate from the majesty of God. His mercy is the final dimension of His majesty. This is the Christian answer to the final problem of human existence.²⁷

Then, in his study of modern conceptions of redemption in *Faith and History* in 1949 he writes:

Ultimately this rebellion of man against God is overcome by divine power, which includes the power of the divine love. The "foolishness of the Cross" as the *ultimate source of wisdom* about life consists precisely in the revelation of a depth of divine mercy within and above the "wrath" of God.²⁸

And finally, this note appears also in *The Self and the Dramas of History*:

²⁵ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.148. Emphasis mine.

²⁶ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, pp.211f. Emphasis mine.

²⁷ "The Power and the Weakness of God" in *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, p.117.

²⁸ *Faith and History*, p.28. Emphasis mine.

Thus the suffering Messiah became, in the eyes of faith, a clue to the mystery of the mercy and justice of God, and the atonement became the real content of the revelation.²⁹

The evidence for the centrality and influence of the doctrine for Niebuhr is overwhelming. Yet we are justified in raising the question as to the technical details of his doctrine.

In his essay about the church in the United States, "Protestantism without Reformation", Dietrich Bonhoeffer's brief comments on Niebuhr are on the whole quite positive. He does go on to add, however: "But even here a doctrine of the person and redemptive work of Jesus Christ are still missing".³⁰ These comments of 1939 may have been altered in the light of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*³¹, though even there Niebuhr chose not to approach the problem of "the redemptive work of Christ" in a traditional way. Yet that does not mean that he chose not to explore the theme at all.³²

²⁹ *The Self and the Dramas of History*, p.91.

³⁰ See "Protestantism without Reformation" in J.W. de Gruchy (Ed.), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ*. (London: Collins, 1988), p.215. The full evaluation of Niebuhr reads as follows: "Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the most significant and most creative of contemporary American theologians, whose main works must be known for a survey of the theological situation (*Moral Man and Immoral Society, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, Beyond Tragedy*), the sharpest critic of contemporary American Protestantism and the present social order, has for years been making a deep impression by his strong emphasis on the Cross as the midpoint and the end of history, coupled with a strongly active political theology. He sees the right way between neo-orthodoxy, for which Jesus Christ becomes the ground for human despair, and a true liberalism, for which Christ is the Lord, the norm, the ideal and the revelation of our essential being. Both are equally necessary. But even here a doctrine of the person and redemptive work of Jesus Christ is still missing."

³¹ The lectures were delivered in April and May, and then in October and November 1939. See Richard Fox, *op. cit.*, pp.188,191. They were only published in 1941 and 1943 however.

³² While John Flynn's comment that "if justification was the centre of theology for the reformers, if they treated the problems it raises in never ending discussions and debate, then Niebuhr can scarcely be

For Niebuhr, the doctrine of the Atonement is one of the great "myths" of the Christian faith.³³ That means that it speaks symbolically about the mystery of the relationship between God and human existence and it is a doctrine that can never be rendered "rationally explicable"³⁴:

There is in fact no theory of the atonement which is quite as satisfying as the simple statements of the vicarious death of Christ in the Gospels. This may mean that faith is able to sense and appropriate an ultimate truth too deep for human reason. This is the foolishness of God which is wiser than the wisdom of men.³⁵

Nevertheless, Niebuhr does not just stop at the "simple statements of the vicarious death of Christ in the Gospels" which he mentions above. Owing to the central place that he accords the doctrine of the Atonement in his theology, he does go on to develop it in a rationally satisfying manner. And in order to understand how he relates to the traditional doctrines of the Atonement we need to locate his work in wider context.

There has never been a single "orthodox" type, theory or doctrine of the Atonement. J.N.D. Kelly in his magisterial work, *Early Christian Doctrines* has written:

admitted to their company" is correct in a technical sense, Flynn does not appreciate that "justification" (in his use a term that includes Atonement) while it is not dealt with in a traditional manner, is nevertheless a central theme in Niebuhr. This shall be detailed below. See John Flynn, *op. cit.*, p.25.

³³ We have previously seen the importance of "myth" in Niebuhr's theological method, and noted the four significant myths in his theology: creation, fall, Atonement and parousia. Commenting on this Kenneth Durkin has written: "The four primary myths act as principles of interpretation of life and experience and they cannot be conflated or isolated... The correct approach is to observe that Niebuhr held all four myths in a creative tension, but the Atonement provides the key to interpretation of all the myths." Kenneth Durkin, *op. cit.*, pp.175f.

³⁴ "Coherence, Incoherence, and the Christian Faith" in *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p.185.

³⁵ *Beyond Tragedy*, p.18.

While the conviction of redemption through Christ has always been the motive force of Christian faith, no final and universally accepted definition of the manner of its achievement has been formulated to this day.³⁶

This has meant that there have been a number of competing doctrines of the Atonement throughout church history. Gustaf Aulén in his book, *Christus Victor*, called into question the prevailing tendency to see just two doctrines, an "Objective" and a "Subjective" type. He writes that "the history of the doctrine of the Atonement is a history of three types of view".³⁷ Aulén calls these the "classic", the "Latin" and the "Subjective" type.

Aulén's work centres on the call to reclaim the "classic" type, and in this polemical context he is perhaps forgiven for undervaluing a number of other theories of the Atonement. For indeed, within and beyond these three types there are a large number of different ways in which Christ's death is seen as salvific.³⁸ Scholars have identified theories to do with *Ransom* (Christ freed us from debt), *Satisfaction* (Christ restored God's honour which was undermined by sin), *Substitution* (Christ died in our place),

³⁶ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*. Fifth Rev. Ed. (London: A and C Black, 1977), p.163.

³⁷ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor*, (London: SPCK, 1931), p.160.

³⁸ See, for example, John M. Shaw, *Christian Doctrine*. (London: Lutterworth, 1953), pp.179-198; Walter Lowe, "Christ and Salvation" in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks*. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), pp.222-247; Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp.303-307; Emil Brunner, *The Mediator*, (London: Lutterworth, 1934), pp.435-535; Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, Vol II, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp.177-226; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man* (London: SCM, 1968), pp.274-280; John MacQuarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, (London: SCM, 1966), pp.280-293; H.A. Hodges, *The Pattern of Atonement*, (London: SCM, 1955); R.W. Dale, *The Atonement*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1878); Robert Franks, *The Atonement*, (London: Oxford University Press); Leonard Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Atonement*, (London: Nisbet and Co., 1951); R.C. Moberly, *Atonement and Personality*, (London: John Murray, 1901).

Recapitulation (Christ has reversed sinful human history), *Sacrifice* (within the Old Testament framework, Christ's death absolves us of sin), *Deification* (God has become human that humans can become divine), *Christus Victor* (Christ has destroyed the power of evil), *Vicarious Repentance* (Christ made an adequate confession and repentance on behalf of humanity), *Reconciliation* (The whole world reconciled to God through Christ), the *Mediator* (Christ mediates God to us and us to God), and *Moral Influence* (Christ's great love for us calls us to live a life of love for God).

Aulén's position notwithstanding, it is clear that behind these varied theories, many of which grow out of a guiding metaphor or idiom suggested by the culture and context, stands perhaps a deeper two-fold division between what are called "objective" and "subjective" theories of the Atonement. These are often identified by the names of the two theologians who first articulated them: Anselm of Canterbury and Peter Abelard respectively. In the former case, the Atonement is something that happens irrespective of human awareness and appreciation of the fact. It is "something accomplished, something done", writes Leonard Hodgson in his defence of this position:

Both in theory and in practice we need to maintain at the heart of the doctrine of the atonement the message of an *objective achievement wrought once for all by God in the history of this world, in virtue of which things are not as they were.*³⁹

In the latter "subjective" case, on the other hand, the Atonement takes place *through* the personal acceptance of the mercy, and commitment to the love of God shown on the Cross.

³⁹ Leonard Hodgson, *op. cit.*, pp.145,149f. Emphasis mine.

Defending this view, Robert Franks writes of the love of God which "pursued the hard and impenitent heart of man to the hill of Calvary":

there it is that the miracle takes place: the hardest thing in the world, the hard and impenitent heart of man, is softened and melted. *Deep calls unto deep. Love answers love; and the Atonement is accomplished.*⁴⁰

There is no doubt that there exists a difference between these two types of theory of the Atonement, and we would be foolish to negate the difference. Nevertheless, outside of a polemical context, it is surely the case that an adequate understanding of the Atonement requires that the divisions be transcended: Speaking about this dichotomy in theories of the Atonement,⁴¹ R.C. Moberley says that by itself the objective view is "non-existent", and the subjective view, "hallucination":⁴²

But in truth the very antithesis is, on examination, artificial and unreal. For here, as elsewhere, the words subjective and objective are only relatively, not really opposed. So far is either of them from really denying, that each in fact implies and presupposes the other; *nor can either of the two, in complete isolation from the other, be itself ultimately real.*⁴³

Niebuhr's doctrine of the Atonement finds itself in harmony with this position that takes both the objective and

⁴⁰ Robert Franks, *op. cit.*, p.196. Emphasis mine.

⁴¹ This is especially the case when one considers the nature of the language of faith. For example, John Macquarrie, *op. cit.*, has written: "we have already seen in our consideration of theological language that the assertions of faith are neither objective nor subjective, but combine elements of both objectivity and subjectivity... Thus there could be no satisfactory view of the atonement that was purely objective, any more than there could be an acceptable subjective view."p.285.

⁴² R.C. Moberly, *op. cit.*, p.142.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.140.

subjective aspects seriously.⁴⁴ We have previously noted the relationship of faith and experience in Niebuhr's method, and the importance he assigns to the "facts of history" for all worldviews including the Christian faith. The same dynamic is found in this instance: *Niebuhr holds to an objective theory of Atonement framed by the questions and concerns of the subjective theory.*⁴⁵

If the outstanding merit of Anselm's "objective" theory is its "emphasis on the seriousness of sin as a wrong done to God",⁴⁶ then this sets Niebuhr apart from that tradition. His concern, like that of Abelard, is far more anthropocentric: the seriousness of sin as a wrong in human history.

He gives little attention to the meaning of sin and forgiveness from God's perspective, and so does not deal in depth at all with the relationship of God to Christ, which is the central relationship in "objective" theories (i.e. what Christ had to "do" to win salvation for humans from God). Thus, if Aulén's "classic" type shows the Atonement as a "movement of God to man",⁴⁷ Niebuhr shows little interest in this movement.

Rather, he approaches the doctrine of the Atonement from the perspective of human destiny, i.e. the relationship of

⁴⁴ In *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr notes that Moberley's book, *Atonement and Personality*, "is a masterful analysis of the relation of grace to the freedom of human personality", and this should alert us to the influence of this book on Niebuhr's own position. *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.143n.

⁴⁵ I think this accounts for the differing evaluations of Niebuhr's Atonement by two significant interpreters, Roger Shinn and John Bennett in correspondence with me. (26.4.1991 and 10.3.1991 respectively).

⁴⁶ John M. Shaw, *op. cit.*, p.185.

⁴⁷ Gustav Aulén, *op. cit.*, p.171.

salvation to history. Thus the relationship of human beings to God - the central relationship in subjective theories of the Atonement - is the framework in which he thinks. Hence, he is more interested in what Aulén sees as the direction of subjective theories: "man's movement to God".⁴⁸ He wants to make certain that the Atonement has to do with human sin, with history, and therefore we find his doctrine framed by the concerns of the subjective theory.

Yet, as we shall see, within the framework there is an underdeveloped, but crucial, "objective" theory at work. Niebuhr does not engage in much technical debate, nor spell out in much detail which theory - ransom, satisfaction, sacrifice, etc. - he holds to,⁴⁹ and he does reject Christ's death as "substitution".⁵⁰ In *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, he vaguely aligns himself with Gustav Aulén's "classical Christian idea of Atonement",⁵¹ but as we shall see there is no "Christus Victor" theme in his doctrine.⁵² Roger Shinn suggests that he

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.171.

⁴⁹ Though we will argue below that he does tend toward the "sacrifice" theme.

⁵⁰ "This doctrine of the atoning death of the Son of God upon the cross has led to many theological errors, among them to theories of substitutionary atonement which outrage the moral sense." *Beyond Tragedy*, p.18.

⁵¹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.56.

⁵² Here Kenneth Durkin's analysis of Niebuhr's doctrine is misleading. Durkin writes of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*: "Where Niebuhr presents the Atonement as the main theme of the volume, he also uncritically aligns his interpretation with Gustav Aulén's "classical" categorization of the myth. This dependence means that Niebuhr's theology is also vulnerable to the same criticisms which have been levelled against Aulén's conception of the Atonement". *Op. cit.*, p.111. And again: "Since Niebuhr accepted the classic type as a description of his own Atonement theory...". *Op. cit.*, p.189. It is clear to us that Niebuhr may have thought he held to the "classic" type, but he did not. It is surprising that Durkin took Niebuhr's single comment - which hardly constitutes a fundamental alignment of theory - at face value. That this supposed dependence then becomes the basis of Durkin's critique is

does not pause to relate his doctrine to Aulén's three types. He dismisses the patristic doctrine in its literal form as absurd, but he reappropriates elements of it and of Anselm's mythological efforts to state what cannot be stated rationally.⁵³

It is clear therefore that Niebuhr never seriously located himself within the debate over theories of the Atonement. Yet it is just as clear that he dealt at length with this doctrine but at a different level. He was not as concerned with the inner logic of the doctrine (i.e. how it works), but rather with its outer force (i.e. what it effects).

His most detailed articulation of this implication of the Atonement is his characterization, following Paul, of the Cross as *wisdom and power*, or in John's terms *truth and grace*, in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. We shall take as our starting point the two-fold division between wisdom and truth, and power and grace.

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3.2.3. The Cross as "Wisdom and Truth".

Niebuhr argues in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* that the significance of the doctrine of Atonement is summed up by Paul when he speaks of Christ crucified as the "wisdom" and "power" of God (I Cor. 1:23f.). It is almost identical to the Johannine assertion that, respectively, "truth" and "grace" came by Jesus Christ (John 1:17).

this Christ who was not expected by the Greeks ("unto the Greeks foolishness"), and who was not

unacceptable. Durkin's otherwise excellent treatment of Niebuhr and the Atonement is flawed by this mistake. We shall deal with Niebuhr's theory of the Atonement presently, but we need to clarify that there is a marked absence of the "Christus Victor" theme - surely the key to Aulén's type - in his doctrine.

⁵³ Letter of 26.4.1991.

the Christ the Jews expected ("unto the Jews a stumblingblock") is nevertheless "unto them which are called both Jews and Greeks, the power of God and the wisdom of God."

The Johannine assertion that "the law was given by Moses but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" makes the same affirmation, correlating two slightly different, but almost identical definitions of the significance of Christ.⁵⁴

So the first aspect of the doctrine of the Atonement for Niebuhr centres upon the Cross as "wisdom or truth". It centres on the divine *disclosure* of the truth about God, about human beings and about their relationship in history. Due to the role of each person in "perceiving" and "acknowledging" this wisdom and truth, it will be noted that there is a strong "subjective" side to this aspect of the Atonement. Thus in the Cross we gain new life *through our discerning* of the truth about God and about ourselves:

Significantly the same suffering love, the same Agape of Christ which reveals the divine mercy is also the norm of a new life. Men may have this new life if they discern what they are and what God is in this focal point of God's self-disclosure.⁵⁵

The two fundamental things that we can discern in the Cross about God and ourselves have to do with God's *righteousness and mercy*.

A. *God's Righteousness: the Cross as Judgement*. In a major section of the *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr deals with the relationship of the Cross to human ethical activity in history, and argues for a three-fold relationship: the Cross completes the incompleteness of human love; clarifies

⁵⁴ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.54. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁵ *Faith and History*, p.144. Emphasis mine.

what is possible in history; and corrects all false pretensions of virtue.⁵⁶

By this Niebuhr means, that while the Cross does represent a perfect sacrificial love that is a goal for all human love, in the end it shows that perfect love is not possible in history, and furthermore that any claim to have achieved this kind of love is false. In so doing, Niebuhr argues, the Cross points to the truth about the human situation, i.e. that it stands under the judgement of the righteousness of God.

For the Cross shows that divine, sinless love (agape) cannot participate in the sinfulness of history and must therefore be crucified. The contrast between the divine goodness and the sin that is intrinsic to the human situation means that

it is impossible to symbolize the divine goodness in history in any other way than by complete powerlessness or rather by a consistent refusal to use power in the rivalries of history.⁵⁷

Or as he puts it in *Beyond Tragedy*, "But pure goodness, without power, cannot maintain itself in the world. It ends on the Cross".⁵⁸ Thus while there are some "validations of agape in actual history",⁵⁹ the Cross makes it clear that there is no possibility of the goodness of God being revealed in history as we know it in any form of human successfulness:

In the realm of ethics as in the realm of truth, the revelation of Christ is foolishness.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, pp.81-94.

⁵⁷ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.72.

⁵⁸ *Beyond Tragedy*, pp.177f.

⁵⁹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.96.

⁶⁰ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.97.

Niebuhr is aware that there is another different perspective on the Cross in western Christian thought. Here the Cross is not a judgement upon history, but rather stands as a realistic challenge for all people to exhibit the self-same sacrificial love as Jesus. This view seeks "to make a success story out of the story of the cross":⁶¹

The death on the cross means an heroic effort of self-regarding men, whose inveterate self-love is the root of all historical evil, to transmute self-regard into self-forgetfulness, into "sacrificial love" or love of the neighbour.⁶²

Yet for Niebuhr, this perspective has not been able to fully grasp the meaning of human history and human destiny. It "has been the occasion for many abortive attempts to give redemption in an unredeemed world a strenuous moral meaning by efforts of calculated forms of "selflessness."⁶³ It has been the source of one of the false soteriologies, the "worship of history". It also fails to understand the meaning of the Cross:

Christ is the essential nature of man, or as St. Paul expresses it, the "second Adam." But the second Adam is not a simple moral possibility for sinful human nature, as the liberal church has believed. The second Adam is crucified by the first Adam, particularly by the first Adam who is trying to be good...⁶⁴

So Niebuhr emphasizes, rather, this other perspective as it takes more seriously the "facts of history". As he puts it, it is "much more in accord with the facts of human existence":⁶⁵

61 "To Prevent the Triumph of an Intolerable Tyranny" in *Love and Justice*, p.276.

62 "The Son of Man must Suffer" in *Justice and Mercy*, p.88.

63 "The Son of Man must Suffer" in *Justice and Mercy*, p.89.

64 *Beyond Tragedy*, p.182.

65 "The Son of Man must Suffer" in *Justice and Mercy*, p.89.

It emphasizes that the life of good and evil men is inextricably involved in a mixture of noble and petty impulses, of concern for the self and concern for the other, and that this mixture of good and evil cannot be overcome by taking thought, or by one more heroic effort to secure the triumph of good over evil; but that mankind must look at the cross of Christ, not as the triumph in defeat of a noble man, but as a symbol of the merciful action of a forgiving God.⁶⁶

Just as history in its judgement of Christ must condemn him to the Cross, so in that very action, history itself is judged and found wanting. The fact that it was the highest form of religion (Jewish) and of jurisprudence (Roman) that sent Jesus to the Cross, stands as a symbol of the fact that even the best that humanity can offer still stands under the judgement of God's righteousness.⁶⁷ The crucifixion of Christ makes clear that in history no historical venture can come close to God's will, that before God's *righteousness* the historical self is the sinful self, and that history is therefore always under judgement. The meaning of history, wrought through with sin, is thus condemnation.

the crucifixion was the final revelation and symbol of the universality of human sin and the incapacity of men to solve the moral problem of human existence by the strenuousness of their moral striving.⁶⁸

If this is the case, then it is clear that history cannot hold the Kingdom of God. The Cross, says Niebuhr,

symbolizes the final goodness which stands in contradiction to all forms of human goodness in which self-assertion and love are compounded.

There are no forms of historical reality which do not contain this sinful admixture. There are no forms of remedial justice from which the egoistic element of vindictiveness has been completely purged.... There are no political

⁶⁶ "The Son of Man must Suffer" in *Justice and Mercy*, p.88.

⁶⁷ See *Faith and History*, pp.143f.

⁶⁸ *Pious and Secular America*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p.133.

strategies for extending the realms of mutuality in the human community which remain immune to the egoistic corruption of imperialism.⁶⁹

To complete the picture of the disclosure of God's judgement on history, we should recall that even before and outside the knowledge of the Cross of Christ, the prophets were able to discern the meaning of history as judgement in the light of God's righteousness. This awareness is something that Niebuhr locates in *original righteousness*. It is that clear awareness in self-transcendence *before the act* that the self is aware that it stands judged before God's righteousness.⁷⁰ The Cross helps to clarify it, but the truth is there all the time:

The fact is that the revelation of the "Cross of Christ" does not superimpose, but merely clarifies, the truth about man's situation when ultimately considered. The situation which is clarified by the Christian faith can be validated by common experience.... The ethic of the Cross therefore clarifies, but does not create, a norm which is given by the very constitution of selfhood.⁷¹

In the discerning of the Cross as Judgement, and particularly due to the fact that this is a truth that history itself discloses to the attentive observer, the subjective side to Niebuhr's doctrine receives its fullest articulation: *Discernment* leads to a change in the sinner's life.

⁶⁹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.89.

⁷⁰ In *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, Niebuhr developed a theory of *original righteousness* and therefore of a natural knowledge of God's judgement in history. For example he writes: "The consciousness of original perfection is not in some universal self in distinction to an empirical self. There are obviously not simply two selves in conflict with each other. But in every moment of existence there is a tension between the self as it looks out upon the world from the perspective of its values and necessities and the self as it looks at both the world and itself and *is disquieted by the undue claims of the self in action.*" p.278. Emphasis mine.

⁷¹ *The Self and the Dramas of History*, p.232.

For Niebuhr argues that the personal discerning of the truth about God's righteousness, and therefore the meaning of history as judgement, helps the person to overcome sin in his or her life. Here we need to remember Niebuhr's understanding of human sin, as the effect of the *temptation* arising from the *anxiety* caused by the paradox of transcendent freedom and necessity in which humans find themselves.

Therefore the personal appropriation of the meaning of the Cross as a judgement on all pretensions to pride and self-righteousness acts to dissuade the Christian from attributing immutable value to anything within this world, and thus temper the *anxiety* that is the ground of the *temptation* to sin.

The first steps towards overcoming sin in human life thus arise out of the discerning of God's judgement upon history. The Christian, gazing upon the drama of the Cross, is moved inwardly to understand the meaning of human history and in particular the truth that absolute truth and love cannot be achieved in history, and therefore to not be tempted to claim absolute significance for partial things. In other words to not allow his or her anxiety to lead to temptation and thence to sin.

Note the overwhelming *subjective* emphasis upon "recognition", "resignation", "saved by repentance" and "man's reconciliation to God through his resignation" in this formulation of the issue:

It is possible for individuals to be saved from this sinful pretension, not by achieving an absolute perspective upon life, but by their

recognition of their inability to do so. Individuals may be saved by repentance, which is the gateway to grace. The recognition of creatureliness and finiteness, in other words, may become the basis of man's reconciliation to God through his resignation to his finite condition.⁷²

As he reflects in a sermon, analysis of the human situation leads to faith:

We are too limited either to comprehend the whole world of meaning or to complete and fulfil the meaning which we comprehend. *This human situation* either tempts us to despair, if it should persuade us that our inability to complete the world of meaning destroys such partial meanings as we do discern; or it prompts us to faith, if we should find the power and wisdom beyond our own, in the very realization of our limited power and wisdom.⁷³

In his book *The Irony of American History*, Niebuhr has a fascinating analysis of the understanding of human history that we have seen the Cross to reveal. Contrasting the biblical view of history as *ironic* with views that are *tragic* or *pathetic*, he argues that the Christian faith

yields a frame of meaning in which human freedom is real and valid and not merely tragic or illusory. But it is also recognized that man is constantly tempted to overestimate the degree of his freedom and forget that he is also a creature. Thus he becomes involved in pretensions which result in ironic refutations of his pride.⁷⁴

Yet for Niebuhr, once one comes to accept the Christian ironic interpretation of life then one is led to "moderate the pretensions which create the irony".⁷⁵ He goes on to say:

Consciousness of an ironic situation tends to dissolve it.⁷⁶

⁷² *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.99. Emphasis mine.

⁷³ "The City which Hath Foundations" in *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, p.80.

⁷⁴ *The Irony of American History*, p.168.

⁷⁵ *The Irony of American History*, p.168.

⁷⁶ *The Irony of American History*, p.168.

In other words, personal "consciousness" about the truth of history as judgement in the light of God's righteousness can lead to a dissolving of the context of sinfulness. This is clearly indicated in this passage in *Faith and History*. In very "subjective" language he draws together the discerning of God's judgement with the promise of new-life through "self-knowledge":

The New Testament ... promises a new beginning in the life of any man, nation, or culture which recognizes the depth and persistence of man's defiance of God. *Where such self-knowledge is achieved both the release from sin through forgiveness and the hope of a new life are possible.*⁷⁷

B. *The Cross as Mercy.* Unlike the discerning of God's righteousness and judgement, at other significant places Niebuhr is clear that there is something significant about human destiny that cannot be found even by a profound analysis of the constitution of human nature or the ironies of human history. It is something to do with the very mystery of God. Thus in what seems to be a refutation of the line of argument we have just identified above, Niebuhr writes in *Faith and History*:

That the final clue to the mystery of the divine power is found in the suffering love of a man on the Cross *is not a proposition which follows logically from the observable facts of history.*⁷⁸

⁷⁷ *Faith and History*, p.140. It should be noted that the previous sentence reads: "The New Testament, on the contrary, regards the defiance by man of the very structure of his existence as a permanent fact in history which is never completely overcome except by divine grace." The juxtaposition of these two ideas in such close proximity, i.e. salvation through grace and salvation through self-knowledge, suggests that Niebuhr was comfortable working with both "objective" and "subjective" theories of Atonement.

⁷⁸ *Faith and History*, p.137. Emphasis mine.

Niebuhr recognizes that even to uncover the irony of history, or to discover the paradoxical constitution of human selfhood and thus to perceive that the meaning of life and human destiny cannot be found in history, may itself reduce the temptation to sin. But ultimately it is of little solace when one considers that even with this disclosure one is still tempted to absolutize the finite and to sin.

The message and story of Jesus needs to be something more than just a message of judgement. The incarnation of the divine love in history can show us that history stands under judgement, but it does not go beyond this. And so Niebuhr is insistent that without the Atonement the incarnation has no salvific meaning. This is because the self in history stands judged not due to its involvement in nature and finiteness, but rather because of the "tragic consequence of his effort to extricate himself" from this situation.⁷⁹

It is not the contradiction of finiteness and freedom from which the Biblical religion seeks emancipation. It seeks redemption from sin; and the sin from which it seeks redemption is occasioned, though not caused, by this contradiction in which man stands.⁸⁰

"In the New Testament", he notes, "the Atonement is the significant content of the incarnation".⁸¹ The incarnation certainly makes it clear that God can relate to humans, yet while this might be of interest to an "Hellenic" understanding of life, it was never something doubted by the

⁷⁹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.145.

⁸⁰ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.178.

⁸¹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.55.

Jews. What is rather more significant is the knowledge that *this relationship involves mercy and not just judgement:*

For this reason the content of revelation is not primarily the assurance that God can speak to man but rather the assurance that His final word to man *is not one of judgement but of forgiveness and mercy.*⁸²

For Niebuhr then, Christ's suffering death on the Cross both discloses the final meaning and paradox of history, and solves it by disclosing the final truth about God: his *mercy*. As we have seen, the meaning of history is condemnation and judgement before God's righteousness. There is nothing in history that can transcend sin and earn its righteousness before God. Towards history and the historical self, God is therefore a God of judgement.

Yet the suffering of Jesus Christ on the Cross proclaims to us something radically new about God. For while God stands in judgement over history for condemning Christ to the Cross, it is not just anyone who suffers on the Cross but the Christ who is God. For Niebuhr, then, this suffering of God becomes a key to unlock the true meaning of human destiny:

The idea of a suffering and therefore merciful God is a clue to the meaning of existence.⁸³

This then is the fullest meaning of *the Cross as wisdom and truth*: it discloses both the *righteousness* (Niebuhr calls it the "justice"⁸⁴) of God, and also the *mercy of God*. Niebuhr proclaims this again and again, as the meaning of

⁸² *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.144. Emphasis mine.

⁸³ *Pious and Secular America*, p.136.

⁸⁴ Previously we have noted our preference for the word righteousness over justice when referring to God's moral will, so as not to confuse the issue with the use of justice to refer to human ethical action.

the Atonement of Christ and the disclosure of meaning about human destiny.

In *Christianity and Power Politics* he writes:

The Christian faith believes that the Atonement reveals God's mercy as an ultimate resource by which God alone overcomes the judgement which sin deserves.⁸⁵

And in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*:

The revelation of the Atonement is precisely a "final" word because it discloses a transcendent divine mercy which represents the "freedom" of God in quintessential terms: namely God's freedom over his own law. Yet this freedom is not capricious. It is paradoxically related to God's law, to the structure of the world. This is the paradox of the Atonement, of the revelation of the mercy of God in its relation to the justice of God.⁸⁶

And in *Discerning the Signs of the Times*:

Thus the final majesty of God is the majesty of His mercy. It is both completion and the contradiction of his power. This is the truth apprehended in the Cross, which resolves the mystery of the relation of justice to mercy, and gives it meaning.⁸⁷

And in *Faith and History*:

The mercy of God does not, according to the faith of the New Testament, annul the justice and wrath of God. The paradoxical relation between God's love and His justice [is] explicated in the doctrine of the Atonement...⁸⁸

In *Christian Realism and Political Problems*:

The whole doctrine of the Atonement in Christian thought contains the paradox of the relation of mercy to judgement. For the mercy of God is in His judgement and yet it is something which cancels His wrath.⁸⁹

And also in *The Self and the Dramas of History*:

⁸⁵ *Christianity and Power Politics*, p.21. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁶ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.67. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁷ "The Power and Weakness of God" in *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, p.129. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁸ *Faith and History*, p.126. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁹ *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, pp.164f. Emphasis mine.

The problem of how *the mercy of God* is related to *His justice* is a perpetual problem in the Old Testament. The new Biblical faith of Christianity enters into history with the affirmation that the drama of Christ's life is in fact a final revelation, in which this problem is clarified by the assurance that God takes the demand of His justice upon himself through Christ's suffering love and therefore "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself".⁹⁰

Só Niebuhr is careful to point out that in the Cross God makes clear his judgement of sinfulness in history, but also offers his mercy to sinners. Only in this final disclosure about God is the true meaning of history disclosed.

The climax of the Biblical revelation of the divine sovereignty over history is in the self disclosure of a divine love, which on the one hand is able to overcome the evil inclination to self-worship in the human heart and which on the other had takes the evil of history into and upon itself.⁹¹

The "wisdom and truth" disclosed by the Cross thus have to do with God's *righteousness and mercy*. Now while the judgement born of God's *righteousness* finds its full meaning as a "disclosed truth", the *mercy of God* is far more than just "wisdom or truth" to be disclosed. To fully appreciate the mercy of God, therefore, Niebuhr sees the need to go beyond the *Cross as wisdom and truth*, and speak of the *Cross as grace and power*. And so we need to interrupt our discussion on the mercy of God so that we can consider it from this other perspective.

⁹⁰ *The Self and the Dramas of History*, pp.65f. Emphasis mine.

⁹¹ *Faith and History*, p.125.

3.2.4. The Cross as "Grace and Power".

The Cross as "wisdom or truth" refers to the fact that the righteousness and mercy of God have been disclosed as the resources which give meaning to history. Accepted in faith this leads to repentance and a reformed life. But Niebuhr wants to say something more than this, and it has to do with the "power" or "grace" arising out of the Cross. The meaning of history has not just been disclosed, but is guaranteed:

The power and grace in Christ is the dynamic authority of the divine sovereign of life and history... The Christian affirmation is that this divine power is now established and disclosed in such a way that there can be no question about any other power being able to overcome it.⁹²

Yet for Niebuhr there is a clear distinction between the disclosure of meaning (wisdom and truth) and fulfillment of meaning (grace and power) in history. While there can be full disclosure of meaning in history, he is at pains to argue that there can be no final experience of the fulfillment of the meaning of life in history. It can only be experienced ambiguously:

It must be emphasized that Christian faith has a more unambiguous confidence in Christ's full disclosure of life, history and God, than in the fulfillment of life's meaning. The idea of "power" and "grace" in Christian thought is ambiguous.⁹³

For Niebuhr the ambiguity turns on the double connotation of the word "grace" in the New Testament. On the one hand it speaks of grace as God's mercy towards sinners (*Christus pro nobis*; God's power over), and on the

⁹² *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, pp.54f.

⁹³ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.61.

other hand as the granting of spiritual gifts (*Christus in nobis*; God's power *in*) to believers.

Grace represents on the one hand the mercy and forgiveness of God by which He completes what man cannot complete and overcomes the sinful elements in all of man's achievements. Grace is the power of God over man. Grace is on the other hand the power of God *in* man; it represents an accession of resources, which man does not have of himself, enabling him to become what he truly ought to be. It is synonymous with the gift of the "Holy Spirit".⁹⁴

The tension between these two aspects of grace is of utmost importance, and Niebuhr often draws attention to them.⁹⁵ In speaking of the difference between Christians and Jews in western Civilization he writes that the Christian tradition has understood the human situation in terms

which Paul describes in the words, "the good that I would I do not do, and the evil that I would not, that I do."

This confession of impotence is probably the most significant characteristic of Pauline Christianity. It is from the diagnosis of impotence that the doctrine of grace achieves its significance; for grace is the answer to the human problem. *Grace is consistently both power and pardon.*⁹⁶

In *The Nature and Destiny of Man* he contrasts the two aspects of grace here termed "power" and "pardon", as between the conquest of sin, and mercy to remaining sin,⁹⁷ or again as between "grace as a power not our own", and

⁹⁴ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, pp.98f.

⁹⁵ Paul Lehmann, in "The Christology of Reinhold Niebuhr", in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, details Niebuhr's thought over the years on these two aspects of grace. He argues that over time Niebuhr's "thought moves from the *Christus in nobis* to the *Christus pro nobis*; and only in the light of the latter does the Christological significance of what has preceded become plain." p.332.

⁹⁶ "The Relations of Christians and Jews in Western Civilization", in *Pious and Secular America*, p.105.

⁹⁷ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.100.

"grace as forgiveness of our sins".⁹⁸ We need to continue our analysis of Niebuhr's doctrine of the Atonement with an evaluation of these two aspects of grace disclosed by the Cross of Christ: grace as *mercy* (i.e. pardon), and grace as *charisma* (i.e. power).⁹⁹

A. *Grace as mercy*. We cut short our discussion above on the "Cross as mercy" at the point where we recognized that Niebuhr wanted to say more about God's mercy than that it is simply "disclosed" by the Cross. As we saw there, salvation as "disclosure" from God's side, goes hand in hand with salvation as "discernment" and "acceptance" from humankind, and this is clearly a "subjective" emphasis. In Niebuhr's desire to say something more than "wisdom" and "disclosure", we meet his underlying concern to ground the doctrine of the Atonement "objectively". He seeks to establish that God's mercy is ultimately not dependent upon anything we can do or accomplish, but is rather a gift of God's grace to us. It is something accomplished by Christ and we benefit through faith.

We have previously noted that while at root, Niebuhr has an "objective" theory of the Atonement he does not locate this in terms of the technical debate about various theories and types of Atonement. The fact that his "objective" theory is in tension with a "subjective" framework also makes his position unusual. This makes it difficult to place him with much precision in any category, though it is

⁹⁸ These are two sub-headings in the discussion of the meaning of grace in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, pp.115ff.

⁹⁹ The term "charisma" is not used by Niebuhr. It will be explained below.

our opinion that he is most comfortable with the idea of Christ's death as an *atoning sacrifice*.

The classical Christian idea of Atonement emphasizes that God is both the propitiator and the propitiated. The Father sends the Son into the world to *become a sacrifice for sin*. But it is also the wrath of the Father which must be propitiated. There can be no simple abrogation of the wrath of God by the mercy of God.¹⁰⁰

The meaning of history found in both the righteousness and mercy of God is thus not just a "truth" to be disclosed, but an objective event on the Cross. There God's judgement and mercy are held together, and through God's own suffering on the Cross, mercy is established as the meaning of history. Jesus' death upon the Cross makes "vicarious suffering the final revelation of meaning in history",¹⁰¹ in that God takes upon himself the suffering.

It is God who suffers for man's iniquity. *He takes the sins of the world upon and into Himself.* This is to say that the contradictions of history are not resolved in history; but they are only ultimately resolved on the level of the eternal and the divine.¹⁰²

This is the final revelation of meaning, that while God remains in judgement over human action he is yet merciful and forgiving. God does not suspend his law and judgement by some divine fiat, but rather takes unto himself the consequences of that judgement in love, taking away the sins of the world while not abrogating his judgement upon the world.

It is important for Niebuhr that God would not just pronounce forgiveness "from in heaven" (so to speak) for two

¹⁰⁰ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.56. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰¹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.45.

¹⁰² *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.46. Note the theme of atoning sacrifice. Emphasis mine.

reasons. The first we have already dealt with, has to do with the need to protect his righteousness in human history. The second is because of the need for this Atonement to be witnessed in history. The contradictions of history are solved only at the level of the divine and yet they must be witnessed to in history so that humans may know of their guilt and redemption.¹⁰³ It is the knowledge that our sins have caused God suffering that ushers in despair.

Justice alone does not move men to repentance. The inner core of their rebellion is not touched until they behold the executor of judgement suffering with and for the victim of punishment. This is the meaning of "atonement" as apprehended by faith.¹⁰⁴

Despair leads to the contrition that asks for forgiveness. And so Niebuhr proclaims this as the meaning of the Atonement, and the key to the human situation:

In this experience, man understands himself in his finiteness, realizes the guilt of his efforts to escape his insufficiency and dependence and lays hold upon a power beyond himself which both completes his incompleteness and purges him of his false and vain efforts at self-completion.¹⁰⁵

The "laying hold of a power beyond" the self is a clear indication that a "subjective" Atonement is not sufficient for Niebuhr. While a subjective reflection upon the meaning of history can lead to a moderation of sinful pride or sensuality, we saw that for Niebuhr the real problem with sin was not the quantity of sins, but rather the fundamental qualitative break in relationship with God, original sin.

¹⁰³ See *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.46. "God's mercy must make itself known in history, so that man in history may become fully conscious of his guilt and his redemption."

¹⁰⁴ "The Power and Weakness of God" in *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, p.128.

¹⁰⁵ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.57.

Thus the root of the problem of sin can only be overcome by God's grace.¹⁰⁶

Trapped in original sin, we have no option but to be "shattered" or "crucified" with Christ. Against a subjective theory of Atonement Niebuhr writes:

The self in this state of preoccupation with itself must be "broken" and "shattered" or, in the Pauline phrase, "crucified." *It cannot be saved merely by being enlightened.*¹⁰⁷

Niebuhr makes use of the doctrine of "Imputed Righteousness" to clarify the implications of his doctrine of the Atonement, and this helps us understand his position. The salvation won by Christ on the Cross has to do with the righteousness of Christ, rather than the righteousness of the believer. To those who apprehend the divine mercy and seek God's forgiveness through faith, Christ "imputes his righteousness".¹⁰⁸ And so Niebuhr is led to affirm the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith:¹⁰⁹

We have now spoken of the *subjective* and the *objective* understandings of the doctrine of the Atonement that Niebuhr deals with and appropriates when dealing with God's mercy. In the former the efficacy of the Cross is dependent upon the subjective inner recognition of the person involved.

¹⁰⁶ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.109. "The Christian doctrine of grace stands in juxtaposition to the Christian doctrine of original sin..."

¹⁰⁷ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.109. Emphasis mine. And again: "According to the Christian doctrine the sinful self must be destroyed from beyond itself because it does not have the power to lift itself out of its narrow interests. It cannot do so because all of its transcendent powers are intimately and organically related to its finiteness." *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.113.

¹⁰⁸ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.103.

¹⁰⁹ "But all this does not change the profundity of the conception of 'justification by faith' and its complete conformity with the conception of life, God and history as we have it in the gospels." *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.104.

Yet we have seen that Niebuhr goes further in his appropriation of the doctrine of the Atonement in that he also proclaims an objective side to the Atonement. Here the Cross not only discloses, but accomplishes the mercy of God, so that we are saved through the grace of God and not through our inner feelings. It is a doctrine of imputed righteousness. Yet we have seen that even this objective side of the Atonement must be appropriated subjectively and inwardly through faith - justification by faith - and it must lead to change and renewal in the life of the believer:

Thus the faith which apprehends the disclosure of the divine mercy and will implies and requires a repentance which leads to a reformation and redemption of life.¹¹⁰

And this reference to "a reformation and redemption of life" brings us to our discussion of the second aspect of grace, grace as "power in" human beings, a "power not our own".

B. Grace as Charisma. Niebuhr makes a distinction between grace as "mercy", and grace as "power", but his use of the term "power" in this instance is terminologically confusing. In clarifying the confusion we will begin to gain an insight into Niebuhr's thinking on this aspect of grace.

We have seen that at a fundamental level he speaks of the Cross as (1) "wisdom and truth", and also as (2) "grace and power". He then locates two further things under this second aspect of the Cross: (2i) grace as the power of God over human beings, which he calls "pardon" and "mercy", and (2ii) grace as the power of God in human beings which he

¹¹⁰ *Faith and History*, p.106.

calls "power not our own" or simply - and this is where the confusion arises - "power".

To make clear that *this* category of "power" (2ii) is a sub-set of the broader term "grace and power" (2), we have chosen the term *charisma*, meaning "a graciously conferred gift" from God.¹¹¹ This term is not used by Niebuhr, but is suggested by his comment that this "power in" human beings is "synonymous with the gift of the 'Holy Spirit'".¹¹²

Thus, if the first aspect of the Cross as "grace and power" has to do with redemption through God's mercy and pardon, this second has to do with God's grace working in the forgiven sinner and giving him or her the *charisma*, the strength to live the new redeemed life. Through this *charisma*, the "objective" salvation won by Christ on the Cross becomes a reality in the new redeemed life of the believer.

For Niebuhr, this second aspect of the Cross as "grace and power" (grace as "power in" or *charisma*) is a significant part of the meaning of the Atonement. We must never negate the human possibilities for creativity in history through this *charisma*. Salvation cannot therefore entail "the denial of history".

Niebuhr argues that it was in the Renaissance that *grace as charisma* was recognized and reaffirmed by the awareness of a transforming power in human life, and thus of human

¹¹¹ See "Charismata" in *The Dictionary of the Christian Church*, J.D. Douglas (Ed.) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978 Rev. Ed.). While it may be objected that the term "charisma" also refers to both grace as power over and power in humans, it is hoped that by choosing a new word and defining it in this instance to mean God's gift of "grace as power in" human beings, we can avoid confusion over the use of the term "power".

¹¹² *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.99.

creativity. This is the aspect of the Renaissance that he affirms:

Life in history must be recognized as filled with indeterminate possibilities. There is no individual or interior spiritual situation, no cultural or scientific task, and no social or political problem in which men do not face new possibilities of the good and the obligation to realize them.¹¹³

Having affirmed grace as charisma, Niebuhr however recognizes a tension between it and grace as mercy. This tension has to do with the nature of history. Niebuhr is aware that the person who in faith discerns the truth about history and God's mercy, and who repents and seeks to live a new life in obedience to God relying on God's grace, continues to live in history and therefore, cannot escape the "facts of history". This person still lives in need of God's continuing grace as mercy.

Too great an emphasis upon grace as charisma without an awareness of the nature of history and the continuing need for mercy leads to the false soteriologies of "the worship of history", and "the denial of history". The Renaissance view must therefore be held in tension with the Reformation view that all human striving stands judged, and salvation is through God's mercy alone.¹¹⁴ These two aspects of grace, what Niebuhr calls the "paradox of grace", is best preserved

¹¹³ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.207.

¹¹⁴ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.125. "The theologies which have sought to do justice to the fact that saints nevertheless remain sinners have frequently, perhaps usually, obscured the indeterminate possibilities of realizations of good in both individual and collective life. The theologies which have sought to do justice to the positive aspects of regeneration have usually obscured the realities of sin which appear on every new level of virtue."

by a synthesis of these Renaissance and Reformation tendencies.¹¹⁵

Whilst the Cross can thus disclose the "wisdom and truth" about God's righteousness and mercy, and it can accomplish the experience of "power and grace" as mercy, it can never therefore *fully* mediate the "power and grace" as *charisma* in history. For the redeemed person remains the historical person, and even after Galgotha history continues to be a compound of freedom and necessity as well as offer the possibilities of both creativity and destruction. If the historical self is the sinful self, Niebuhr is clear that the "redeemed" historical self also continues to be the sinful self.

Redemption does not guarantee elimination of the sinful corruptions, which are in fact increased whenever the redeemed claim to be completely emancipated from them.¹¹⁶

The historical person who is redeemed through the Cross therefore continues to experience history under the same conditions as the "unredeemed" person. Through grace as "charisma", the Christian participates in the "newness of life", while at the same time conscious of the persistence of sin. And so while the redeemed self is "crucified" with Christ and the believer experiences new life in Christ, he

¹¹⁵ In what could be called a paradigmatic statement of intent Niebuhr proclaims: "A new synthesis is therefore called for. It must be a synthesis which incorporates the twofold aspect of grace of Biblical religion, and adds the light which modern history, and the Renaissance and Reformation interpretation of history, have thrown upon the paradox of grace". *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.207.

¹¹⁶ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.213.

or she is yet aware that the new life is not a possession, but is an experience of faith.¹¹⁷

Redemption means that the sinner knows himself to be in the embrace of a divine love in spite of his sin.¹¹⁸

The doctrine of Imputed Righteousness which Niebuhr had recourse to to explain the mercy of God also underscores this experience. The self is considered righteous not through any act of its own, but through the act of Christ on the Cross. Christ's righteousness is therefore "imputed" to the believer through faith, who is then considered righteous by God. The essential point here is that righteousness never becomes the possession of the believer.

The very burden of the Pauline message is that there is no peace in our own righteousness. The final peace of the soul is gained on the one hand by the assurance of divine forgiveness; and on the other hand by "faith." The Christ who is apprehended by faith, i.e. to whom the soul is obedient in principle, "imputes" his righteousness to it. It is not an actual possession except by "faith".¹¹⁹

The point Niebuhr is making in his interpretation of Paul is that within history the redeemed believer continues to struggle with anxiety, temptation and sin. The self is therefore the new self by God's grace and by faith, not by

¹¹⁷ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, pp.108-115. Niebuhr examines in some detail Paul's confession in Galatians 2:20: "I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me...". Niebuhr interprets the passage in this way: (i) the whole self, body and soul, must be shattered (I am crucified) by the power and holiness of God; yet (ii) the self is not destroyed (I live); but (iii) finds new life through the grace of Christ (yet not I) while also (iv) affirming that the new self is an expression of faith rather than a lived experience (Christ liveth in me).

¹¹⁸ "The Assurance of Grace" in R.M. Brown, *op. cit.*, p.68. This is a reprint of the final chapter of *Reflections on the End of an Era*.

¹¹⁹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.103. Emphasis mine.

any achievement or fulfilled experience on the part of the self. The self is thus always *simul justus et peccator*.¹²⁰

Niebuhr is very fond of quoting the Pauline assertion in Romans 7:19 that "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do",¹²¹ and also vs. 23 that "I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members".¹²² Although there is exegetical uncertainty about whether these confessions are about Paul's pre-Christian experience,¹²³ Niebuhr is clear that they capture a significant experience of even those who are redeemed.

... we cannot believe St. Paul meant to confine his confession to the state before conversion. The record of Christian history proves that no living man is ever completely emancipated from the inner contradictions, which the chapter so eloquently portrays.¹²⁴

He goes on to note that while this doctrine has been "offensive to moralistic interpreters of Christian faith", and while it "has been corrupted innumerable times", it is "in complete conformity with the conception of life, God and history as we have it in the gospels".¹²⁵

If the nature of history militates against the fulfillment of grace as charisma, then that fulfillment will only become a reality when the nature of history changes, i.e. at the

¹²⁰ And so Niebuhr quotes both Martin Luther and Emil Brunner positively on this issue. See *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.124n.

¹²¹ See *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, pp.106ff.

¹²² See *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, pp.145f.

¹²³ Niebuhr is aware of this exegetical debate. He writes: "Whether this confession was intended to be purely retrospective, or was meant to express a tension which even the redeemed experience, is an exegetical problem which is answered according to previous doctrinal suppositions". His position is quoted below.

¹²⁴ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.106.

¹²⁵ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.104.

end of history, the *eschaton*. Whilst we can experience grace as mercy, the experience of grace as charisma remains unfulfilled in the interim between the death of Christ and the Second Coming.

Thus history as we know it is regarded as an "interim" between the disclosure and the fulfillment of its meaning. Symbolically this is expressed in the New Testament in the hope that the suffering Messiah will "come again" with "power and great glory".¹²⁶

The full meaning of the Atonement of Christ can therefore only be fully understood from the perspective of the Kingdom of God to be established at the end of history.

This tension between history as experienced now and as it will be when it is fulfilled was indeed a significant part of Christ's prophetic ministry. He himself captures the tension within history and the relationship of God's kingdom to history with the paradoxical pronouncement that the Kingdom of God has come, and is yet still expected. This tension can be expressed in a number of ways: the sovereignty of God has been disclosed but not established; the meaning of life has been revealed but not fulfilled; sin has been overcome in principle but not in fact; history knows its true meaning, and yet it stands in contradiction to that true meaning.

The Kingdom of God as it has come in Christ means a disclosure of the meaning of history but not the full realization of that meaning.

That is anticipated in the Kingdom which is to come, that is, in the culmination of history. It must be remembered that a comprehension of the meaning of life and history from the standpoint of the Christian revelation includes an understanding

¹²⁶ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.288.

of the contradictions to that meaning in which history is perennially involved.¹²⁷

For Niebuhr this is a central part of the Christian expectation of the culmination of history. His analysis of two themes to do with the eschaton¹²⁸, namely the last judgement and the figure of the Antichrist flesh out the meaning of the fulfillment of grace as charisma in history. The idea of a *last judgement* even at the end of history is a reminder that all historical actions, even those of the redeemed, stand under the judgement of God.

The idea of a "last" judgement expressed Christianity's refutation of all conceptions of history, according to which it is its own redeemer and is able to by its process of growth and development, to emancipate man from the guilt and sin of his existence, and to free him from judgement.¹²⁹

Furthermore the New Testament speaks of the appearance of the *Antichrist* at the end of history. At the time of the coming of the kingdom there will be "wars and rumours of wars", and that the ultimate struggle between good and evil, between God and Satan will therefore take place at the end of history.¹³⁰ In other words, even in the light of the Cross of Christ history is not moving progressively towards higher and higher possibilities of love, truth and justice, but rather continues to exhibit the same potential of creativity and destruction.

In the whole of the New Testament, Gospels and Epistles alike, there is only one interpretation

¹²⁷ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.288.

¹²⁸ He also deals with other themes such as the Parousia and the resurrection of the dead. See the last chapter, "The End of History", in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, pp.287ff.

¹²⁹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.293.

¹³⁰ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.318: "The Antichrist stands at the end of history to indicate that history cumulates, rather than solves, the essential problems of human existence."

of world history. That pictures history as moving toward a climax in which both Christ and anti-Christ are revealed.

The New Testament does not, in other words, envisage a simple triumph of good over evil in history. It sees human history involved in the contradictions of sin to the end, That is why it sees no simple resolution to the problem of history. *It believes that the Kingdom of God will finally resolve the contradictions of history; but for it the Kingdom of God is no simple historical possibility.* The grace of God for man and Kingdom of God for history are both divine realities and not human possibilities.¹³¹

The full and final experience of God's grace as charisma (power in) awaits therefore the final consummation in the second coming of Christ and the Kingdom of God.

This return of Christ stands at the "end" of history in such a way that it would sometimes appear to be a triumph in history and to mean a redeemed temporal-historical process. But according to other, and usually later, interpretations, the fulfillment of the historical process is also its end in the quantitative sense; and the redemption of history would appear to be its culmination also.¹³²

What this tension makes clear is that for Christians, history and all human endeavour must be understood from within the "interim" between this fulfillment and promise. Grace as *charisma* calls us ever forward through "the impulse towards the fulfillment of life in history",¹³³ but grace as *mercy* reminds us of the limits on *charisma* in the interim of history. History remains under the judgement of God, and perfection cannot be found within historical existence.

The possibilities of new evil cannot be avoided by grace; for so long as the self, individual or collective, remains within the tensions of history and is subject to the twofold condition of involvement in process and transcendence over it, it will be subject to the sin of overestimating

131 *Christianity and Power Politics*, pp20f.

132 *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, pp.290f.

133 *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.160.

its transcendence and of compounding its interests with those which are more inclusive.¹³⁴

The meaning of the doctrine of the Atonement, as experienced in the believer through God's grace, thus has this double connotation of calling the person to higher and greater expectations of love and truth and justice (contra the *denial* of history), and yet reminding him or her that sin remains, so that within history all "contradictions and "final corruptions" cannot be eliminated (contra the *worship* of history), and that to claim that they have involves the person in higher and greater denials of love, truth and justice (contra the *completing* of history).

Repentance does initiate a new life. But the experience of the Christian ages refutes those who follow this logic and without qualification... Human pride and spiritual arrogance rise to new heights precisely at the point where the claims of sanctity are made without due qualification.¹³⁵

The doctrine of the Atonement is thus no simplistic Christian answer to the problem of sin and the human quest for redemption. Mediated to the believer through the grace of God, it is caught in the tension between grace as mercy and the forgiveness of sins on the one hand, and grace as charisma and the redeemed life on the other. This tension, as we have seen, is allied to the Christian understanding of the eschaton, the end and culmination of history. The full

¹³⁴ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.123.

¹³⁵ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.122. Niebuhr defends this so: "The sorry annals of Christian fanaticism, of unholy religious hatreds, of sinful ambitions hiding behind the cloak of religious sanctity, of political power impulses compounded with pretensions of devotion to God, offer the most irrefutable proof of the error in every Christian doctrine and every interpretation of the Christian experience which claim that grace can remove the final contradiction between man and God."

experience of redemption awaits the second coming of Christ and the establishment of the Kingdom.

As we shall now see this should not lead to complacency in the life of the believer, but it does help to put historical action into perspective. Niebuhr puts it thus:

It is a good thing to seek for the Kingdom of God on earth, but it is a very dubious claim to have found it.¹³⁶



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¹³⁶ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.178.

3.3. Human Destiny as the Practice of Justice.

In the first chapter we noted a number of themes that were significant for Reinhold Niebuhr: the relationship of ethics to soteriology, the focus of ethical practice upon responsibility, and the concern for justice rather than for liberation. Having analyzed his thought in depth we now come full circle, to the point where we can recognize and affirm the importance of these themes for him. On closer scrutiny our initial statement of the thesis has thus been confirmed.

What we have argued in this thesis is that for all Niebuhr's disavowal of systematic theology, the theme of redemption in general, and the doctrine of the Atonement in particular, are the hermeneutical keys to unlock his ethical thought. For Niebuhr, ethics cannot be thought of apart from the question of human destiny, and human destiny involves the question of redemption. Christian ethics is therefore grounded in the doctrine of the Atonement.

It is our contention that while Niebuhr rejects a relationship between redemption and history conceived of as *the search for liberation*, he himself conceives of this relationship as *the practice of justice*.

In this section, we shall therefore proceed to lay out in a theoretical manner the path from the Atonement to the practice of justice. First we note the implications of the Atonement and God's grace on the ethical life of the believer as a challenge to love (3.3.1.), and then we shall

look at the content of that action as the practice of justice (3.3.2.). Finally, as a transition to our evaluation and critique in our final chapter, we shall identify some points of criticism about Niebuhr's understanding of justice (3.3.3.).

3.3.1. The Challenge to Love.

We have previously seen that Niebuhr argued that the Hebrew prophets were the first to see that the meaning of history was related to God's *righteousness, mercy and love*. He goes on to argue that the Christian doctrine of the Atonement discloses God's *righteousness and mercy*, and makes that mercy real in the life of the believer (grace as mercy). Through grace, the Cross is also *charisma*, power to live the redeemed life,¹ and thus the third of the prophetic themes - *love*, or the challenge to ethical action, is also deeply related to the Cross.

Before turning specifically to the theme of *love*, we need to make clear the significance of the *righteousness* and the *mercy* of God disclosed in the Cross for ethical action. Insofar as these provide a permanent transcendent critique of all human sinfulness, their ethical role could be termed a "negative influence". If for Niebuhr "the grossest forms of evil enter into history as schemes of redemption",² then true redemption through the Cross has the effect of negating these "gross forms of evil".

¹ With all the necessary qualifications we have noted above.

² *Faith and History*, p.214.

One gets a feel for this "negative influence" in Niebuhr's essay, "Christian Faith and Social Action", written in 1953:

The task of any movement devoted to "social Christianity" must be, therefore, not so much to advocate a particular nostrum for the solution of various economic and social evils, but to bring the full testimony of a gospel of judgement and grace to bear upon all of human life...³

God's righteousness as a judgement upon the sinfulness of human action grants to the believer an awareness of the futility of trying to give universal significance to finite things. Pride is challenged, and the sins of pride are by implication negated. The awareness that we are redeemed only by God's mercy means that the anxiety that is the basis of temptation is resolved not quantitatively in the drive for greater and greater power and security,⁴ but in the qualitative response of obedient subjection to the will of God.

In that case the alternate moods of despair and false hope are overcome and the individual is actually freed to live a life of serenity and creativity.⁵

We can see the practical implications of the "negative influence" of the Cross for ethics in this reflection at the time of the question of United States participation in World War II. Niebuhr argues:

In its profoundest insights the Christian faith sees the whole of human history as involved in

³ Ronald Stone (Ed.), *Faith and Politics*, (New York: George Braziller, 1968), p.137. First published in J.A. Hutchison (Ed.), *Christian Faith and Social Action* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953).

⁴ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.51. "To understand life and history according to the meaning given it by Christ is to be able to survey the chaos of any present or the peril of any future, without sinking into despair."

⁵ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.58.

guilt, and finds no release from guilt except in the grace of God. *The Christian is freed by that grace to act in history; to give his devotion to the highest values he knows; to defend those citadels of civilization of which necessity and historic destiny have made him the defender; and he is persuaded by grace to remember the ambiguity of even his best actions.*⁶

In perhaps the most significant section detailing the ethical implications of the doctrine of the Atonement in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr deals with the relationship of the Cross of Christ to the possibilities of history.⁷ Here he spells out the threefold meaning of the Cross for ethical action and, by implication, sets up a clear distinction between the truth of the Christian doctrine of the Atonement as against the "false soteriologies" of the worldviews he analyses. Two of these aspects of the meaning of the Cross have to do with its "negative influence".

Firstly, as Niebuhr's analysis of perfect love in history indicated, the Cross of Christ shows that perfection can only exist in history by disavowing power and undergoing suffering, and therefore reveals "the completing of history" as a false soteriology.

The Cross represents a perfection which *contradicts* the false pretensions of virtue in history and which reveals the *contrast* between man's sinful self-assertion and the divine *agape*.⁸

Secondly, as we have amply illustrated above, the Cross acts as a critique on all hopes for ultimate achievements in

⁶ "Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist", in *Christianity and Power Politics*, p.30. Emphasis mine.

⁷ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, pp.81-90.

⁸ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.89. My emphasis on the words "contradicts" and "contrasts" serves to highlight the "negative influence" for ethics of the Cross.

history and so it reveals "the worship of history" as a false soteriology.

The Cross represents a transcendent perfection which clarifies obscurities of history and defines the limits of what is possible in historic development.⁹

As we move to the third aspect of the Cross, the "negative influence" makes way for a "positive influence", and this has to do with the disclosure of God's love. The "negative influence" serves its purpose in undermining and negating the ethical wrongs arising from all attempts to worship and complete history.¹⁰ By itself this makes little contribution to the needs of the world, but the Cross does not stop with just God's righteousness and mercy. It goes on to disclose God's love, God's divine agape.

Thus thirdly, the whole point of proclaiming God's mercy as the final meaning of history, is the setting free of the individual from seeking self-justification to get on with the positive task of responding to the love of Christ in history. "The denial of history" is thus revealed as a false soteriology. In arguing that through the Cross

⁹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.86. As in the previous reference, my emphasis on "defines the limits" highlights the "negative influence" of the Cross.

¹⁰ Thus: "The Cross clarifies the possibilities and limits of history and perennially refutes the pathetic illusions of those who usually deny the dimension of history which reaches into Eternity in one moment, and in the next dream of achieving an unconditioned perfection in history", *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.88; and: "We cannot be complacent about this imperial corruption in all forms of political justice and social organization. The Cross is a constant source of contrition in regard to the corruption. But neither does history, even on its highest levels, achieve a purity which removes the contradiction between the divine agape and the egoistic element in the human community". *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.89.

"Sacrificial love (*agape*) completes the incompleteness of mutual love (*eros*)",¹¹ Niebuhr notes that

even the purest form of *agape*, the love of the enemy and forgiveness towards the evil-doer, do not stand in contradiction to historical possibilities.¹²

To reinforce his argument, Niebuhr approaches these same ethical aspects of the Cross from the perspective of Christ as the "Second Adam".¹³ In his role as the "Second Adam", Christ "defines the final perfection of man in history",¹⁴ and lays out the possibilities for ethical action in the way we have outlined above. Christ as "Second Adam" symbolizes the Christian rejection of those false soteriologies, which "seek to escape from history" and those "in which history fulfills itself too simply".¹⁵

If the Christian doctrine of Christ as the "second Adam" refutes both the romantics, who think a return to *primeval innocency* possible [i.e. "the completing of history"], and the evolutionary optimists who think that *history moves towards a perfection* in which nature-history is transcended without ceasing to be grounded in nature [i.e. "the worship of history"], it also refutes the mystics who seek perfection by contemplation of, and final incorporation into, an eternity from which all *vitalities and particularities of history* have been subtracted [i.e. "the denial of history"].¹⁶

¹¹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.82.

¹² *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.85.

¹³ See the chapter, "Christ and the Limits of History" in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, pp.68ff. Kenneth Durkin comments: "The significance of the title 'Second Adam' is derived from reflection on the Atonement by the 'little Christian community'... It is the title which expresses the ethical dimension of the Atonement". *Op. cit.*, p.115.

¹⁴ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.68.

¹⁵ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.91.

¹⁶ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.90. Emphasis and interpolations have been added to illustrate the point.

In these three ways then, the doctrine of the Atonement indicates that the Cross of Christ is intrinsically related to action in history:

By its confidence in an eternal ground of existence which is, nevertheless, involved in man's historical striving to the very point of suffering with and for him, *this faith can prompt men to accept their historical responsibilities gladly.*¹⁷

For Niebuhr this means that while the Cross of Christ calls attention to the enduring paradox of history and the impossibility of achieving liberation in history, and while it makes clear that in history all ethical actions stand under judgement, it nevertheless still has implications for life in history. "For the Christian realist there was no ultimate fulfillment in society," writes Richard Fox about Niebuhr's position, "but neither was there any salvation apart from the life of social and political engagement".¹⁸

In *Discerning the Signs of the Times* he puts it:

We cannot live by historic achievement alone, through we cannot live meaningfully without historic achievement.¹⁹

and again in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*:

Ideally the doctrine of justification by faith is a release of the soul into action...²⁰

¹⁷ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.321. Emphasis mine. It is out of this perspective that Niebuhr penned his famous Serenity Prayer: "God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other". This is included as a frontpiece in *Justice and Mercy*. For background to this prayer see p.5; and Richard Fox, *op. cit.*, pp.290f.

¹⁸ Richard Fox, "The Living of Christian Realism" in R. Harries (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.10.

¹⁹ "The Age Between the Ages" in *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, p.52.

²⁰ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.188.

and with supreme clarity in *The Self and the Dramas of History*:

The ultimate judgements which are interpreted by the key of the Christ revelation can, in short, never be socially irrelevant... For the believer is challenged to become engaged in the sorrows and sufferings of the world.²¹

Having an awareness that because of human freedom, history will always contain possibilities for both creativity and destruction, and thus that the true meaning of history awaits the final coming of the Kingdom of God, "makes the ultimate moral attitude toward our fellows more possible and freer of pretension".²² It sets the believer free from denying, worshipping or completing history, to seek the good for the neighbour:

Love, compassion toward our fellow men, which is the ultimate good according to our Christian faith, cannot be achieved by strenuous striving; rather, it is achieved by an honest self-scrutiny and self-awareness which discovers affinities between the foe's obvious weaknesses and our hidden vices.²³

Because the challenge to action arises out of the agape of the Cross, it is at the same time the challenge to love. The life and ministry of Christ, and most supremely his sacrificial death on the Cross, lays the foundations for the Christian ethic which is the call to agape, perfect

²¹ *The Self and the Dramas of History*, p.226.

²² *Justice and Mercy*, p.94.

²³ *Justice and Mercy*, p.94. D.R. Davies comments: "Revolutionaries have always been intolerant. But it makes all the difference in the world whether intolerance is looked upon and felt as a virtue or a sin. If it be regarded as a virtue, then the corrupting element in every revolution operates without check or inhibition. If it is felt to be a sin, then the corrupting element operates under some sort of control. Now the great historic significance of Niebuhr's insight into the relativity of all historic situations and judgements is precisely that it brings this tendency to intolerance and its consequent brutality under moral judgement." *Op. cit.*, p.63.

sacrificial love. This is the ideal for all ethical action in history, and provides a constant challenge for all to follow.

Yet, as the doctrine of the Atonement makes clear, the result of perfect love in history is rejection and death. History cannot hold agape.

... the Kingdom of God enters the world in tragic terms. The "prince of glory" dies on the cross".²⁴

And because, as Niebuhr notes, any attempt to follow this ideal of love in society "will inevitably lead us to where it led Jesus, to the Cross",²⁵ we are faced with an "impossible ethical ideal":

In genuine prophetic Christianity the moral qualities of the Christ are not only our hope, but our despair.²⁶

Against those who would turn the love of Christ into a simple ethical ideal, most notably the Liberal Protestants, Niebuhr is at pains to emphasize that the perfect love of Christ, as evidenced upon the Cross stands as an overpowering critique of our attempts to love. The historical self is the sinful self, and all attempts to live this perfect life of love are bound to fail.

And yet against those who would doubt the importance of the need to follow Christ's example, most notably Protestant Orthodoxy, Niebuhr constantly calls them to live in love in society. While history has possibilities for destructiveness, there are yet possibilities for creativity

²⁴ "The Suffering Servant and the Son of Man", in *Beyond Tragedy*, p.184.

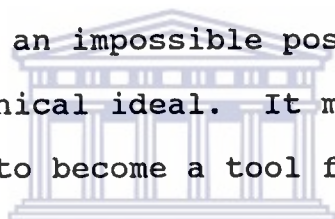
²⁵ "The Ethic of Jesus and the Social Problem" in *Love and Justice*, p.33.

²⁶ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.131.

amongst those who humbly recognize the paradox of history. Love therefore becomes the "impossible possibility", and Niebuhr can speak about the "relevance of an impossible ethical ideal":²⁷

Christ is thus the revelation of the very impossible possibility which the Sermon on the Mount elaborates in ethical terms. If *Christian orthodoxy* sometimes tends to resolve this paradox by the picture of a Christ who has been stripped of all qualities which relate him to man and history, *Christian liberalism* resolves it by reducing Christ to a figure of heroic love who reveals the full possibilities of human nature to us. In either case the total human situation which the mythos of the Christ and the Cross illumines, is obscured.²⁸

In the light of Christ's atoning death on the Cross, love is therefore an impossible possibility, or a relevant but impossible ethical ideal. It must be translated into justice if it is to become a tool for practical Christian use in life.



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3.3.2. The Practice of Justice.

The Christian is challenged by the Cross of Christ to live a life of love. This challenge arises in the life of the redeemed person through grace as *charisma*, and finds its inspiration in the agapaeic love of Jesus on the Cross. In order that it not be just idealism and sentimentality, this love has to be practiced in history, and that means that it must take the nature of history seriously.

Now, we have seen that even for the redeemed person, grace as *charisma* cannot be fulfilled in history. We have

²⁷ The heading of a chapter in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.113.

²⁸ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p.130. Emphasis mine.

also seen that perfect love cannot exist in history save on the Cross. The challenge to love, the "impossible possibility", thus must be mediated in history to become the practice of justice.²⁹ Whilst the sacrificial love exemplified by the Cross of Christ is an ideal that sinful humans can only approximate, *relative justice* is the stuff of the rough and tumble of society:

Justice is partly maintained by balances of power in which the push and shove of competing vitalities in society is brought into some kind of stable or unstable equilibrium....

These facts are so plain that every effort to introduce suffering love as a simple alternative to the complexities and ambiguities of social justice must degenerate into sentimentality.³⁰

"The key to understanding Niebuhr's ethic is the dialectical relationship between love and justice", writes Ronald Stone,³¹ and in turning to this relationship we must note three important aspects. Firstly, justice is the practical outworking of love in the face of the "facts of history"; secondly, the demands of justice are a check against the outworking of love; and thirdly, the demands of love are a check against the claims of justice.³²

In the first instance then, justice is the practical outworking of love in the face of the complexities and paradoxes of the historical self.

²⁹ Gordon Harland, *op. cit.*, conceives his book around this relationship between love and justice.

³⁰ *Faith and History*, p.184.

³¹ Ronald Stone, *op. cit.*, p.231.

³² Gordon Harland, *op. cit.*, pp.24f., also envisages a three-fold relationship which he conceives as: "Love demands justice"; "Love negates justice"; and "Love fulfills justice". There is a difference, however, as his second and third themes are included in my third one; and he does not seem to deal with the fact that the demands of justice are a check against the outworking of love. Love not only "demands" but also "relies on" or "needs" justice to prevent it from becoming sentimental.

Every realistic system of justice must assume the continued power of self-interest, particularly of collective self-interest. It must furthermore assume that this power will express itself illegitimately as well as legitimately... A profounder Christian faith must encourage men to create systems of justice which will save society and themselves from their own selfishness.³³

Love, for Niebuhr, struggles to make the necessary distinctions that are needed in politics. Yet that is precisely what is needed to be ethically responsible in history. In a sermon Niebuhr says:

We have to admit that it makes a very big difference when we defend freedom against tyranny, and truth against the lies of the world. How else could we build history except by these rigorous distinctions between good and evil, right and wrong?³⁴

For Niebuhr, this need for distinctions between good and evil, justice and injustice, is a significant part of the biblical Christian faith.³⁵

It is this emphasis upon the translation of the perfect sacrificial love of Christ shown upon the Cross into the relative justice that is required in history that made Niebuhr characterize his thought as "Christian Realism",³⁶

³³ "Justice and Love" in *Love and Justice*, p.28.

³⁴ "The Wheat and the Tares" in *Justice and Mercy*, p.55. And again elsewhere: "We must also find some 'moral' meaning, some valid distinction between 'good' and 'evil' if we want to preserve our moral integrity, or at least sanity, in the multifarious conflicts on the historical scene." *Pious and Secular America*, p.39.

³⁵ "The insights of faith upon the conflict between good and evil men and upon the conflict between just and unjust nations rightfully belongs to the bible, and we have no reason to be ashamed for including it in or Christian life. In times when some Christians are tempted to evade their responsibility for maintaining a relative justice in an evil world we must actually turn to this level of thought in the Bible." "The Conflict between Nations and Nations and between Nations and God" in *Love and Justice*, p.162.

³⁶ See the essays in *Christian Realism and Political Problems*. John Cooper writes: "'Realism' for Niebuhr implies a paradoxical or dialectical embodiment of justice and love in the political order". *The Theology of Freedom: The Legacy of Jaques Maritain and Reinhold Niebuhr*. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985).

though it should be clear that this perspective can only be understood in terms of the wider context of Niebuhr's ethical thought in the light of the Atonement of Christ.

The second relationship between love and justice is the concern that the demands of justice be a check against the outworking of love. For if love is not held accountable to the demands of justice then it deteriorates into charity and philanthropy, both of which Niebuhr feels undermine Christian ethical actions:

Love in the form of philanthropy is, in fact, on a lower level than a high form of justice. For philanthropy is given to those who make no claims against us, who do not challenge our goodness and disinterestedness. An act of philanthropy may thus be an expression of both power and moral complacency. An act of justice on the other hand requires the humble recognition that the claim that another makes against us may be legitimate.³⁷

As Kenneth Durkin puts it: "Niebuhr concluded that whenever the love ideal of Christianity degenerates into pure philanthropy, without regard for the difficult task of achieving social justice, it becomes a cloak hiding the face of social justice."³⁸

Finally, Niebuhr argues that the demands of love are a check against the claims of justice. While justice is the expression of love, insofar as the emotional and sacrificial aspects of love are always diminished when it is translated into justice, justice has become something less than love.

Therefore equal justice is on the one hand the law of love in rational form and on the other hand something less than the law of love.³⁹

³⁷ "The Spirit of Justice" in *Love and Justice*, p.26.

³⁸ Kenneth Durkin, *op. cit.*, p.39.

³⁹ *Faith and History*, pp.190f.

Because justice has to do with the relativities of history, and is something less than love, especially the perfect love as seen in Christ's sacrifice on the Cross, love is not only the fountain of justice but also its greatest critic.

... the Christian conception of the relation of historical justice to the love of the Kingdom of God is a dialectical one. Love is both the fulfillment and the negation of all achievement of justice in history.⁴⁰

Justice then stands as the pinnacle of Christian ethical action as the response to the Atonement of Christ on the Cross, for "without the atonement all religious conceptions of justice degenerate into legalism and all conceptions of love into sentimentality".⁴¹ Justice itself therefore also stands in the threefold relationship to the Cross in which all human action in history stands. Because justice flows out of the love of the Cross, we cannot evade the responsibility for justice lest we "deny history" and thereby deny our salvation; Because the love of the Cross remains the greatest critic of justice we cannot turn justice into an object of devotion lest we "worship history" and thereby deny our salvation; and because perfect justice, like the perfect love of the Cross cannot exist in history we cannot rest satisfied with the justice we have lest we "complete history" and thereby deny our salvation. As Ruurd Veldhuis puts it:

⁴⁰ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.246. He continues: " Or expressed from the opposite standpoint, the achievements of justice in history may rise in indeterminate degrees to find their fulfillment in a more perfect love and brotherhood; but each new level of fulfillment also contains elements which stand in contradiction to perfect love."

⁴¹ "Coherence, Incoherence and Christian Faith" in *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p.185.

A fixed scheme of justice is dangerous as it represents an adjustment to sin. If such a scheme were declared to be absolute and ultimate, it would in fact help to stabilize and even institutionalize sin.⁴²

Even justice, therefore, like all other finite human achievements in history stands under the judgement of the love of Christ shown on the Cross. Speaking contextually during World War II, Niebuhr says:

As a principle of indiscriminate criticism upon all forms of justice, the law of love reminds us that the injustice and tyranny against which we contend in the foe is partially the consequence of our own injustice.⁴³

Because of this inclination to allow justice to become something much less than the law of the love, and ultimately through human sin to become injustice, Niebuhr was clear that structures had to be established in society to control this inclination to both justice and injustice. For him this was best done through democracy:

Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.⁴⁴

And the strength of democracy is its ability to the control the balance of power that is necessary for justice in society. All societies are built around power, and whilst power is necessary to ensure justice, the same power can and does lead to injustice. The democratic balance of power is thus the best way of ensuring that justice is maintained in society. Charles West comments that democracy

as the political method and framework for the endless experiments which are necessary to achieve

⁴² Ruurd Veldhuis, *op. cit.*, p.114.

⁴³ "Why the Christian Church is not Pacifist" in *Christianity and Power Politics*, pp.22f.

⁴⁴ *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, p.xiii. This is the overriding theme of this book.

a just balance among the changing power groups and vital interests of society, is for Niebuhr the Good in politics.⁴⁵

Thus before the *righteousness* of God, all human attempts at justice stand under judgement, and find fulfillment only in the gracious *mercy* of God revealed in the Atonement of Christ. While called to love expressed as the practice of justice, we remain justified by faith:

Justification by faith in the realm of justice means that we will not regard the pressures and counter pressures, the tensions, the overt and the covert conflicts by which justice is achieved and maintained, as normative in the absolute sense; but neither will we ease our conscience by seeking to escape from involvement in them. We will know that we cannot purge ourselves of the sin and guilt in which we are involved by the moral ambiguities of politics without also disavowing responsibility for the creative possibilities of justice.⁴⁶

The Christian is therefore led, through the doctrine of the Atonement to leave aside the question of liberation and to practice justice. Liberation, in terms of Niebuhr's understanding confuses the relationship between redemption and history that the Cross discloses. The practice of justice, however, is demanded by those redeemed by the Cross who are living in the "interim" in history.

Langdon Gilkey has summed this up magnificently:

His theology of atonement, justification and the paradox of grace was not designed to eradicate hope for the future but precisely to eradicate the nemesis of self-destructive fanaticism and the despair that arise therefrom. His theology sought to provide the most creative ground of political action possible. Even at its seemingly most impractical and theological, it was always a political theology, the theoretical ground for *praxis*.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Charles West, *op. cit.*, p.155.

⁴⁶ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.284. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁷ Langdon Gilkey, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology of History", n N.A. Scott, Jr. *op. cit.*, p.56.

3.3.3. The Weaknesses in Niebuhr's Understanding of Justice.

The practice of justice was a life-long concern for Reinhold Niebuhr. Right at the beginning of his career he noted, "I was shocked by the fact that the rich Protestant churches, those which we called in Detroit, the Woodward Avenue churches, insistently talked about sacrificial love and completely neglected the need of justice as a relevant norm of collective relationship."⁴⁸ And in his final book *Man's Nature and His Communities*, published in 1966, he describes the "guiding principle throughout my mature life of the relation of religious responsibility to political affairs" in this way:

my strong conviction that a realist conception of human nature should be made the servant of an ethic of progressive justice and should not be made into a bastion of conservatism, particularly a conservatism which defends unjust principles.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, Niebuhr struggled to provide a framework for practicing justice that would stand the test of time. As James Gustafson notes, "Niebuhr certainly does not develop a theory of justice",⁵⁰ and Theodore Minnema comments that "when moving from the claim that there are universal principles of justice to the question of what these principles are in particular, Niebuhr is somewhat obscure."⁵¹ Emil Brunner has made a similar criticism of

⁴⁸ Niebuhr's comment in an interview published in Patrick Granfield, *op. cit.*, p.52. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁹ *Man's Nature and His Communities*, p.16. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁰ James Gustafson, "Theology in the Service of Ethics: An Interpretation of Reinhold Niebuhr's Theological Ethics" in R. Harries (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.33.

⁵¹ Theodore Minnema, *op. cit.*, pp.61f.

Niebuhr's "lack of an adequate concept of justice",⁵² and he goes on to ask about concrete choices in society:

Anyone who in the name of justice offers a critique of social issues or of political policy is thereby under obligation not only to state what he means by "justice" but also what concrete choices are demanded in the name of this "justice" that he is talking about.⁵³

Perhaps the most important implication of this underdeveloped theory of justice is that it was not able to prevent Niebuhr's thinking from shifting to become quite conservative in later years. Dennis McCann has called this an "ideological drift" in his ethical thought which saw him "gradually abandoning his more radical political orientation in favour of 'piecemeal reformism'."⁵⁴ A short list of certain of his actions of which we would be critical serves to illustrate our concern:

He became an outspoken supporter of zionism;⁵⁵ he supported the decision to drop the atomic bombs on Japan;⁵⁶ he supported the U.S.A. right to "defend" Korea;⁵⁷ he publicly stated that the Russian "spies", the Rosenbergs, should be executed;⁵⁸ his anti-communism became so marked that he turned on a number of friends such as Paul Lehmann and Guy Shipler;⁵⁹ he excused the policies of dictators if they were anti-communist;⁶⁰ he came to believe in the "openness" of capitalist culture⁶¹ and he refused to sign a petition organized by Martin

⁵² Emil Brunner, "Some Remarks on Reinhold Niebuhr's Work as a Christian Thinker" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.85. He comments: "Always he was concerned for human dignity and for justice. All the more surprising is it, therefore, that Reinhold Niebuhr has never worked out a clear concept of justice whereby the difference between the demands of justice and those of the supreme ethical norm of love might be understood". p.85.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.85.

⁵⁴ Dennis McCann, *op. cit.*, p.105.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.210,226

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.224f.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.241.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.252. Though he later saw this as an error. See p.254.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.252ff.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.274.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.279.

Luther King Jr. to ask for federal intervention in a racially tense situation.⁶²

We need to recognize again the contextuality of his thought, which meant that Niebuhr was constantly evaluating its adequacy in the light of events in history such as "the threat of fascism, the success of Roosevelt in reforming capitalism, the machinations of the Communist Party in American leftist organizations".⁶³ Furthermore, he really believed that the struggle against Soviet Communism was the struggle against tyranny in his day, and besides even in his most conservative days, he was under scrutiny of the FBI and groups like the American Council of Christian Laymen for being "unAmerican".⁶⁴ In later years, also, he began to be critical of U.S.A. involvement in Vietnam and supported the Civil Rights movement.⁶⁵

However, the question still arises as to the effectiveness of Niebuhr's ethical theory if it could allow him to "drift" so much on important issues. One of the areas in which this is most notable is in Niebuhr's reflections on foreign policy and his lack of critique of U.S. imperialism.⁶⁶ Reflecting upon Niebuhr's criticism of the United States' opposition to Britain and France's invasion of Egypt over the Suez crisis, Ronald Stone notes this unashamedly imperialist note when he refers to

Niebuhr's insistence that imperial nations ought to recognize their power and attendant

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.282.

⁶³ Richard Fox, "The Living of Christian Realism" in R. Harries (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.9.

⁶⁴ Richard Fox, *op. cit.*, pp.241f.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.281ff.

⁶⁶ Paul Merkley, *op. cit.* Merkley characterizes him as "astonishingly naive about such themes as the United States of America's nineteenth- and twentieth-century dealings with her American neighbours." p.188.

responsibilities and utilize force where necessary to secure the interests of their allies and themselves.⁶⁷

But perhaps the most important issue is to do with the political situation in the U.S.A. itself. Niebuhr really believed that the balance of power represented by the democracy of the United States had achieved a sustainable political system that catered for approximate justice.⁶⁸ In 1955 in *The Self and the Dramas of History*, Niebuhr wrote concerning the United States:

As a nation, we therefore belong to the healthier nations of the Western world who have reached a tolerable solution of the problem of justice within the conditions set by a dynamic civilization.⁶⁹

Yet, Stephen B. Oats in his biography of Martin Luther King Jr., writes concerning the same year in the same United States of America:

By the spring and summer of 1955, a flame of discontent was smouldering below the surface of passivity in black Montgomery. King himself sensed the stirrings - a growing resentment at white man's justice, sexual abuses, and endless daily harassment and humiliation.⁷⁰

Indeed, the Civil Rights movement in the United States only really began in earnest at the end of 1955 when on December 1, a black woman, Mrs Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to move from a white seat on a bus, thus setting in motion a whole chain of events that shook the foundations of

⁶⁷ Ronald Stone, *op. cit.*, p.191.

⁶⁸ Michael Link notes: "Niebuhr thought that Americans had achieved approximate social justice in the only way justice could be gained in an industrial society. They had balanced power. They had done so by using the power of labor against capital. When the strength of labor had proved insufficient, political force was used to redress the disproportionate power of capitalism for the benefit of society as a whole." *Op. cit.*, p.93.

⁶⁹ *The Self and the Dramas of History*, p.201. Emphasis mine.

⁷⁰ Stephen B. Oats, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Mentor, 1985), p.59.

the United States.⁷¹ As the writings of King himself, Malcolm X, and other Afro-Americans indicate, Niebuhr could not have been more wrong in his perception of the state of health in the United States with regards to justice.⁷²

Charles West thus notes with regards to Niebuhr's thoughts on justice:

This basic satisfaction with the progress of the last few years in Anglo-Saxon lands, this confidence in the method by which it was achieved, and this impression which one gains more and more from Niebuhr's writings in recent years, that America has achieved a relative solution of the problem of justice in her domestic life, is all evidence of conservatism.⁷³

Paul Merkley speaks of his "complacency on domestic matters" such as racial inequality, the labour situation, urban decay and poverty:⁷⁴

The deeper failing of Niebuhr's commentary on social and economic problems during the 40s and 50s is the scarcely disguised assumption that problems were solved in principle.⁷⁵

And John Bennett put it in 1956:

There is a difference today in that he is more willing to accept social inequalities than he was fifteen years ago because he is more fearful of the threat to efficiency and to freedom if efforts are made to impose equality on society.⁷⁶

⁷¹ The best discussion of the Civil Rights movement centered around Martin Luther King Jr. is David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*. (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1986).

⁷² See James H. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991); James M. Washington (Ed.), *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Fransisco: Harper and Row, 1986); Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1964); George Breitman (Ed.), *Malcolm X Speaks* (New York: Grove Press, 1966) and *Malcolm X: By any Means Necessary*, (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970).

⁷³ Charles West, *op. cit.*, p.167.

⁷⁴ Paul Merkley, *op. cit.*, pp.188ff.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.179.

⁷⁶ John C. Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethics" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.113.

It was this general perception of the conservative tendencies in Niebuhr's thought that has led to a neo-conservative concern in U.S. theological circles for "needing Niebuhr again".⁷⁷ It was also this perception that led the Latin American theologian Rubem Alves to call Christian Realism an "Ideology of the Establishment":

Realism and pragmatism are words dear to American ears, hearts, and brains. If this is so, anyone who is involved in social analysis should suspect at once that realism is functional to the system, contributes to its preservation and gives ideological and theological justification.⁷⁸

Interpreters have proposed various remedies for this "ideological drift". Some have suggested that Niebuhr's whole method be abandoned.⁷⁹ Some have suggested that the right-wing reading of Niebuhr is illegitimate and that Niebuhr's thought is capable of sustaining a progressive political position.⁸⁰ Others have affirmed the basic thrust of Niebuhr's position, but identified a weakness within it,

⁷⁷ See Michael Novak, "Needing Niebuhr Again" in *Commentary*, Vol 54. No..3, September 1972. pp.52ff. This is also the position from which John W. Cooper, *op. cit.*, interprets Niebuhr. Ruurd Veldhuis suggests part of the reason for this: "It is clear that there has been a shift in emphasis in part connected with Niebuhr's estrangement from socialism. Niebuhr's original biased position in the social struggle is not so striking any more. Maybe this is the irony of Niebuhr's development the more he comes to discard the initial partiality of his social thought and to strip it of its ideological one-sidedness, the more his 'mature' thought becomes suited for ideological misuse by others." *Op. cit.*, p.126.

⁷⁸ Rubem Alves, "Christian Realism: Ideology of the Establishment" in *Christianity and Crisis* Vol 33 No.15, September 17, 1973. p.176. This article was in response to Thomas Sanders' article in the same issue, "The Theology of Liberation: Christian Utopianism". These two articles sparked off a debate in the pages of the October 15 edition of *Christianity and Crisis* with contributions from John Bennett, John Plank, Robert McAfee Brown, Thomas Quigley and Jaques Kozub.

⁷⁹ For example, Judith Vaughan, *op. cit.*; Holtan P. Odegard, *Sin and Science* (Yellow Springs, Ohio: The Antioch Press, 1956); and John Howard Yoder, *op. cit.*

⁸⁰ See for example, Ronald Preston, "Reinhold Niebuhr and the New Right" in R. Harries (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.88ff.; and Robert McAfee Brown in his "Introduction", *op. cit.*

the most dominant one being that Niebuhr lacked an adequate social theory to help him locate his theological principles in concrete ways.⁸¹ This is the position of Dennis McCann:

because he was unable to develop a critical social theory consistent with the paradoxical vision, his later work suffers from ideological drift. This represents a weakness rather than a fundamental flaw in Christian realism...⁸²

There is merit in this criticism,⁸³ and we recognize that other interpreters have made the point adequately.

However, we are persuaded that *due to the importance of soteriology for ethics* in Niebuhr's thought, and particularly the fact that his theory of justice flows out of the doctrine of the Atonement, there is a need for an evaluation and criticism of the way he related justice to the doctrine of the Atonement. In our final chapter, therefore, we affirm Niebuhr's basic position, but go beyond him as we suggest some important aspects of a politically responsible soteriology on the basis of our critique of his thought.

⁸¹ See the discussion in Larry Rasmussen (Ed.), "Introduction", in *op. cit.*, pp.35ff.

⁸² Dennis McCann, *op. cit.*, p.237.

⁸³ We would go along with Beverly Harrison on this important point: "It is my further contention that radical or neo-Marxian social theory answers several important religious-ethical criteria in ways that other social theories widely used in our discipline do not and that failure to recognize this has precluded a more critical address to questions of economic justice." *Op. cit.* p.58.

CHAPTER FOUR: TOWARDS A POLITICALLY RESPONSIBLE SOTERIOLOGY.

This final chapter is an evaluation and critique of Niebuhr's thinking on human destiny, and particularly his understanding of the doctrine of Atonement and its relationship to justice. In dialogue with his thought we explore some aspects of a politically responsible soteriology.

There are of course many themes in the work of Reinhold Niebuhr that one could evaluate.¹ Scholars have taken issue with him on a number of issues including his lack of ontology,² his male-centered anthropology,³ his failure to deal with the role of economic activity in society,⁴ his lack of critical social theory,⁵ his inadequate interpretation of sociality,⁶ his weak biblical interpretation,⁷ his image of Jesus,⁸ his rejection of the Trinity and deity of Christ,⁹ his failure to recognize the

¹ For the most comprehensive summary of the criticisms of Niebuhr's thought see Larry Rasmussen (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.32ff.

² Most notably Paul Tillich. See "Sin and Grace in the Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr" in H.R. Landon (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.36f. and "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Knowledge" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.93ff.

³ So Judith Plaskow writes, "although Niebuhr claims to describe *human* nature, *human* sin, and the *human* need for grace, in fact his theology is most relevant to the nature and problems of men in our society, and especially the nature and problems of powerful men." *Op. cit.*, p.92.

⁴ See Beverly Harrison, *op. cit.*, p.59.

⁵ Dennis P. McCann, *op. cit.*, p.237.

⁶ This is the central criticism of Judith Vaughan, *op. cit.* See p.3. From this are derived other criticisms to do with Niebuhr's dualism (p.114), patriarchal view of women (p.115), his privatized morality (p.117) his hierarchialism and domination-subordination model of God (p.122), and finally his false consciousness (p.194).

⁷ See Kenneth Durkin, *op. cit.*, pp.83f.

⁸ Larry Rasmussen (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.39.

⁹ John L. Flynn, *op. cit.*, pp.118ff.

deepest level of sin¹⁰ his arrogance towards the Roman Catholic Church,¹¹ his lack of focus on the Holy Spirit and therefore on the church and regeneration,¹² and his failure to support episcopacy(!).¹³

Our aim in this final chapter is not to debate these criticisms, some of which we would accept. Given the centrality of soteriology for his ethics, we will rather focus our evaluation and critique on his understanding of the relationship of redemption to history, and thus his understanding of the doctrine of the Atonement and justice.

We have previously seen that Niebuhr seldom engages with traditional debates about the Atonement, but rather identifies the "Christian doctrine of the Atonement", with his own reflection upon the significance of the Biblical witness about the Cross of Christ. It is therefore unhelpful to identify Niebuhr's doctrine with one of the standard types, and then proceed to critique him on the basis of another standard type.¹⁴ We have chosen rather to conduct our evaluation and critique in the light of a broader New Testament witness against which Niebuhr himself strove to be true.

¹⁰ Henry Nelson Wieman, "A Religious Naturalist looks at Reinhold Niebuhr" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.424f.

¹¹ See Gustave Weigel, SJ. "Authority in Theology" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.448ff.

¹² This is quite a common criticism. See for example Rachel Hadley King, *The Omission of the Holy Spirit from Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology* (New York, Philosophical Library, 1964); John Howard Yoder, *op. cit.*, pp.21ff.; and William John Wolf, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.321ff.

¹³ This strange critique is from D.R. Davies, *op. cit.*, p.92.

¹⁴ Kenneth Durkin's critique of Niebuhr's doctrine of the Atonement displays this weakness. He identifies Niebuhr's position (incorrectly) with Gustav Aulén's "Classic position", and then proceeds to critique this on the basis of a prior commitment to another position (in this instance the "Latin" type). *Op. cit.*, p.189f.

In the light of this witness, we are persuaded that Niebuhr's basic articulation of the doctrine of the Atonement should be affirmed. His characterization of the relationship of redemption to history as *not liberation but justice* is correct, and safeguards against both the demonization and divinization of politics. This is the substance of our first section of this chapter (4.1.).

However, having correctly interpreted the significance of the doctrine of the Atonement for history as the practice of justice, we have seen that Niebuhr fails to provide an adequate framework for the practice of justice, and is prone to "ideological drift". We identify three areas in which Niebuhr's understanding of justice needs development: hope, solidarity, and reconciliation. We argue further that these themes can be integrated into the doctrine of the Atonement if it seeks to interpret the Cross in relation to the full story of Easter (4.2.), the full story of the Gospels (4.3.), and the full story of the New Testament (4.4).

4.1. Against the Demonization and Divinization of Politics.

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God...

God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things - and the things that are not - to nullify the things that are, so that no-one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us the wisdom of God - that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. (I Cor 1:18,22-24,27-30).¹⁵

He was crucified, died and was buried. He descended to the dead...

I believe the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. (The Apostles Creed).

It is our contention that Reinhold Niebuhr's interpretation of the doctrine of the Atonement stands as a safeguard against both the demonization and the divinization of politics. He writes:

Christianity must therefore wage constant war, on the one hand against *political religions* which imagine some proximate goal and some conditioned good as man's final good, and on the other hand against an *otherworldliness* which by contrast gives these political religions a seeming validity.¹⁶

In our opinion this is his most significant contribution to Political Ethics.

Other interpreters have noted this concern in Niebuhr's thought, though none have identified it as a key contribution. John Cooper argues that Niebuhr sought to

¹⁵ This and all further Biblical references are from the New International Version of the Bible, (New York International Bible Society, 1978).

¹⁶ "Ten Years that Shook my World" in *The Christian Century*, Vol 56, April 26, 1939, p.545. Emphasis mine.

avoid the extremes of political theology represented by Christian Liberalism and Christian Orthodoxy, respectively: "The former, he argues, takes a too optimistic view of the relationship between religion and politics, and the latter a too pessimistic view."¹⁷ John Bennett makes a similar comment:

The pious of the liberal sort who mix their piety with idealistic illusions and the pious of the orthodox sort who allow the gospel of forgiveness to make them prematurely complacent about what they cannot do because of sin, come in equally for condemnation.¹⁸

We turn now to examine Niebuhr's criticism of both.

A. *The demonization of politics.* We have seen that for him the "denial of history" is a false soteriology. It offers a false hope of salvation from the ambiguities and perplexities of history by offering a redemption that has nothing to do with history. The worldviews within this category usually demonize politics. That is, by envisaging salvation as a liberation from history they often minimize and, more commonly, undermine the political task by placing it outside the realm of redemption. History has nothing to do with redemption, and so politics is considered foreign, then alien, and finally demonic in the sense that it becomes the "realm of the devil", and Christians are to have nothing to do with it.

Niebuhr has shown that this cannot be the case for Christians who take the salvific significance of the Cross of Christ seriously. His interpretation of the doctrine of

¹⁷ John W. Cooper, *op. cit.*, p.153.

¹⁸ John C. Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Contribution to Christian Social Ethics" in H.R. Landon (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.65f.

the Atonement takes seriously the ethical implications of the love that Jesus showed in his sacrificial death on the Cross *in history*. Thus the Cross "completes the incompleteness of mutual love". And this means it stands as a constant challenge to human ethical endeavour in history. Niebuhr affirms those worldviews that appreciate

the agape of the Kingdom of God as a resource for infinite developments *towards a more perfect brotherhood in history*. The uneasy conscience of man over various forms of social injustice, over slavery and war, is an expression of the Christian feeling that history must move from the innocence of Adam to the perfection of Christ, from the harmony of life with life in unfree nature to the perfect love of the Kingdom of God....

For the freedom of man makes it *impossible to set any limits of race, sex, or social condition upon the brotherhood which may be achieved in history*.¹⁹

This love, within the bounds and limits of historical existence must find expression as justice, and for Niebuhr *this is an unashamedly political task*. Flowing out of the Atonement then is the call to engage history seriously and not to demonize politics. Niebuhr's own involvement in political organizations which we noted in our first chapter was grounded in and legitimated by this belief.

Niebuhr was fond of quoting the Pauline passage from the First Letter to the Corinthians that we began this section with. It encapsulates much of his thinking about the Atonement, and in particular his concern to take history seriously by not avoiding the political task of practicing justice. Paul speaks of Christ as "foolishness to Gentiles" precisely because the Greeks did not see any relationship between God's redemptive will and history, whereas the Cross

¹⁹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.85. Emphasis mine.

stands squarely in history, and has to do with God's involvement in history. "To the Greeks the Christ is foolishness because he represents a disclosure of the eternal in history".²⁰

Thus Paul goes on to speak about God's redemptive will being shown in history with the foolish, weak, lowly and despised things of the world being "chosen by God". And so in a sermon on this passage, Niebuhr can say:

Prophetic religion is bound to speak a special word of warning and condemnation to those who are firmly established in history, whether individuals or classes, because they are particularly tempted to imagine themselves the authors and sole protectors of what is good in history.²¹

Niebuhr's reflection upon this passage sets the Cross of Christ against the denial of history and the demonization of politics. This means that Christians are called to be involved politically in the practice of justice.

Christianity is not a flight into eternity from the tasks and decisions of history. It is rather the power and the wisdom of God which makes decisions in history possible and which points to proximate goals in history...²²

B. The divinization of politics. On the one hand, Niebuhr is highly critical of those who see politics as demonic and therefore to be avoided, and on the other he is critical of those who divinize politics. He notes that amongst those who take the historical and political task seriously, there is a tendency to not observe the distance between redemption and history, and therefore to interpret a religious theme in

²⁰ *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol II, p.37.*

²¹ "The Things that Are and the Things that Are Not." in *Beyond Tragedy*, p.218.

²² "Ten Years that Shook my World" in *The Christian Century*, Vol 56, April 26, 1939, p.545.

a purely political sense. The result of this is the mixing of religious and political concerns so that politics is divinized.

Speaking of the word of judgement *in history*, Niebuhr says:

if this word stands alone a religio-moral insight is easily reduced to a purely political one and religion may thus become a mere tool of the rebellion of the weak against the strong....

Whenever it has learned to speak that word it has also entertained, and frequently succumbed to, the temptation of corrupting it into a purely political judgement.²³

For Niebuhr it is significant that the Pauline passage we examined above goes on to say that the significance of the Cross is not only "foolishness to the Greeks", but also "a stumbling block to the Jews". We have seen this theme emerge in his discussion on the relationship of Jesus to Prophetic Messianism. For it is the Jews who seek a fulfillment and completion of history in the coming of the Messianic king. They express the hope of a judgment and a vindication that is purely historical.

This is not what the Cross of Christ proclaims. The Cross for Niebuhr indicates that the conflicts of history are not resolved in history alone, but only through the suffering love of a God who is both just and merciful. Full redemption cannot come in history, but only at the end of history, for in history all political struggles are incomplete and must stand under the judgement of the justice of God. They cannot claim finality. Against this temptation, therefore, Paul notes that the Cross implies

²³ "The Things that Are and the Things that Are Not." in *Beyond Tragedy*, p.218.

that God chose "the things that are not to nullify the things that are, so that no-one may boast before him":

Against the danger of this temptation stands the further insight that God will take "the things which are not to put to nought the things that are." Every life, whether mighty or weak, whether respected or despised in a particular situation, is under the peril of regarding itself as necessary and central in the scheme of things, rather than as contingent and dependent. More accurately, it seeks to overcome the apprehension of its own insignificance by protesting its significance overmuch and implementing this assertion by deeds of imperialism.²⁴

The basic problem with the relationship of redemption to history conceived of as liberation is therefore for Niebuhr the divinization of politics. Politics becomes the only realm of meaning and significance. Redemption is so swallowed up in the process of history that there is no longer any critical edge allowed to faith, and the "facts of history" are denied. This can only lead to injustice.

The disinherited are human, in other words, and therefore subject to basic human sins. The weak will not only sin when they become mighty, but they sin in prospect and imagination while they are weak. The communist denial of this fact is being tragically refuted in contemporary Russian history in which the weak, who have become mighty, are committing all the sins of the mighty of other generations. Siberian exile in 1905 does not guarantee social or moral disinterestedness in the oligarch of today.²⁵

The rejection of the divinization of politics does not discount the historical task. On the contrary, the individual, aware of his or her shortcomings and temptations, and no longer driven by anxiety to make final claims for his or her political decisions and choices, is

²⁴ "The Things that Are and the Things that Are Not." in *Beyond Tragedy*, pp.218f.

²⁵ "The Things that Are and the Things that Are Not." in *Beyond Tragedy*, pp.219f.

set free to work and struggle for justice. This "nonchalance of faith" is a direct result of justification by faith flowing out of the Atonement.²⁶ Ruurd Veldhuis summarizes Niebuhr's position as a "demythologizing of power", in other words a rejection of those who sacralize politics.²⁷ Niebuhr says:

One need not be a secularist to believe that politics in the name of God is of the devil. This should be obvious to right-minded religious people, for religious politics invariably gives an ultimate sanction to highly ambiguous political programmes. Every political policy, however justified, must be regarded as ambiguous when it is related to the ultimate sanctity. Since the political order inevitable deals with power, a religious politics always means the identification of some position of power with God.²⁸

The Cross shows that we cannot divinize history and politics, because history cannot hold the divine. The divine in history must suffer. And the Cross also shows that all of history stands under God's judgement, and that all politics therefore remains imperfect. Yet this does not do away with the need for justice because history is not to be denied nor politics demonized.

Justice is best served if all hopes and pretensions of liberation in history are set aside, and human beings get on with the political task of making human existence more democratic, free and equitable.

²⁶ See Gordon Harland's discussion on Niebuhr's use of the term "nonchalance of faith" in *The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp.147ff.

²⁷ Ruurd Veldhuis, *op. cit.*, p.112. "The loyalty to God as the transcendent source of our being prevents our this-worldly loyalties from becoming absolute. That we must obey God rather than men, relativizes all human authority. And what is more, it demythologizes human power and it demands that all human power be made responsible." Emphasis mine.

²⁸ In H.R. Davis and R.C. Good, *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), p.203. Emphasis mine.

So while Niebuhr was deeply involved in political action throughout his life, from the period after the publication of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* he was strongly opposed to any specifically Christian political party. Paul Merkley notes how earlier he had in fact called for the starting of a Christian political party,²⁹ and had seen in Britain's Labour Party "the secret of 'Christian politics'",³⁰ but then came *Moral Man and Immoral Society*:

All consideration vanishes with this work of the possibility of making the ethics of Jesus into a political program. One can comb the works of Niebuhr with the finest of combs and one will not find, after this work, any further references to "Christian politics," "Christian solutions," or "applying the rule of love" - or any of the religions-perfectionist phrases that sounded so regularly in his earlier work.³¹

Niebuhr was thus highly critical of any attempt to sanctify political policies through religious legitimation. At the time of the First World War, he was "consistently repelled by clergy who were eager to make the war a holy cause".³² In one of his final articles Niebuhr attacked Richard Nixon for turning the White House into a "kind of sanctuary" by inviting religious leaders to address "The King's Chapel and the King's Court".³³ Reflecting upon "Religious Politics" in 1951, Niebuhr wrote:

The fact is that a simple identification of religious and political convictions, whether on the right or the left, is noxious. The evils of religious politics of any shade are due to the

²⁹ Paul Merkley, *op. cit.*, p.31.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.57.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.84.

³² Ronald Stone, *op. cit.*, p.40. In our excursus on South Africa, we will also see how horrified he was by the Christian legitimation of apartheid.

³³ "The King's Chapel and the King's Court" in *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol 29, No.14. August 4, 1969. pp.211f.

fact that religion deals with life's ultimate ends and meanings, while politics must inevitably strive for proximate ends of life and must use ambiguous means to attain them. *Therefore it is dangerous to claim the sanctity of the ultimate for political ends and means.*³⁴

Thus Richard Fox could comment that for Niebuhr, "No commitment was above challenge, no party, programme, or institution was to be spared the searing scrutiny, just as none was to be condemned without seeking out the good that might be found in it".³⁵

This then is the great strength of Niebuhr's understanding of the relationship of redemption to history. His understanding of the doctrine of the Atonement acts as a safeguard against the demonization and divinization of politics, and we are persuaded that this is a significant and healthy contribution to political ethics. Niebuhr has also shown how the political search for justice is grounded "at the centre" of the Christian faith, in the Cross of Christ itself. And furthermore, he has begun to indicate some of the outlines of what that search for justice may entail.

However, by taking such a strong position against both the demonization and divinization of politics, and thereby keeping a clear line between religion and politics for all the right reasons, Niebuhr's political ethics struggle to be informed in a deeper sense by the morality of the Christian faith. Politics becomes based on "realism" and then

³⁴ "Religious Politics" in *Christianity and Society*, Vol 16. No.4. Autumn, 1951. p.4. Emphasis mine.

³⁵ Richard Fox, "The Living of Christian Realism" in R. Harries (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.22.

"pragmatism",³⁶ and the specific insights of the faith stand in ultimate rather than proximate judgement.

We have previously noted the criticism of Niebuhr's understanding of justice. It is our opinion that Niebuhr could have developed the doctrine of the Atonement in such a way that it gave him some creative directions within the practice of justice. In our search for a politically responsible soteriology, we need now to go beyond his conception of the relationship of the doctrine of the Atonement to justice as we consider the themes of hope, solidarity and reconciliation.



³⁶ Ronald Stone, *op. cit.*, provides the best discussion of Niebuhr's movement to pragmatic-liberalism. See especially pp.166f.

4.2. Atonement and Hope (or the Cross and the Full Story of Easter).

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.
(Colossians 2:13-15).

On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven. (The Apostles Creed).

There is no doubt that Niebuhr's enduring contribution to theology and Christian political ethics is his articulating of the consequence of living under the paradox of grace. Yet his vision of the moral task is dragged down by an almost weary sense of the impossible and the deep pessimism that comes from knowing that everything will fall short of and stands under judgement of God's justice. Ruurd Veldhuis comments:

But exactly at this point a difficulty in Niebuhr's approach becomes evident. The problem is whether a sober appraisal of the facts and real possibilities will suffice to arouse the enthusiasm needed to fight for higher realizations of justice.³⁷

The sense of judgement is certainly seen in the Cross, and any doctrine of the Atonement has to take this seriously. However, there are other sides to the Cross that Niebuhr does not reflect upon, and these also have to be taken seriously.

The Cross is not only judgement and mercy, but it is also victory. This is the message of Paul's reflection in Colossians: that in the Cross something has been overcome,

³⁷ Ruurd Veldhuis, *op. cit.*, p.93.

there is a "triumphing over" the powers and authorities. And this is a significant side of the Atonement that Niebuhr does not do justice to. His is definitely not a *Christus Victor* type of Atonement.

In order to fully appreciate this aspect of the Atonement, we also need to note that Niebuhr's articulation of the Atonement centres almost exclusively upon the Cross, whereas it would seem to us that the Cross cannot be seen in isolation from the *whole story of Easter, and therefore from the resurrection of Jesus*. Any adequate articulation of the doctrine of the Atonement would thus have to take both the Cross and resurrection seriously.

The fact is that apart from a few references in *Faith and History*, Niebuhr "has no theology of the resurrection of Jesus".³⁸ John Howard Yoder notes this:

Although the New Testament understands the cross only in the light of the resurrection, Niebuhr speaks of the cross repeatedly, of the resurrection of Christ not at all, and of the resurrection of the body only as a mythological symbol for the fact that the superhistorical triumph of the good must also somehow involve history.³⁹

Niebuhr's doctrine of the Atonement ends with the death of Christ upon the Cross as a sign of judgement and mercy. This leads Charles West to comment:

But the cross leaves man where he was before in the complex of historical forces. It lifts no burden from him. It clarifies, but does not essentially change his responsible action toward the powers of this world.

In short, Niebuhr's picture of history places us perpetually in the twilight position of

³⁸ Kenneth Durkin, *op. cit.*, p.99.

³⁹ John Howard Yoder, *op. cit.*, p.20. Emphasis mine.

standing under the Cross, looking forward toward the Resurrection....⁴⁰

Yet there was also the resurrection. The Biblical and Christian tradition affirms that we cannot understand the meaning and significance of the Cross save from the perspective of the resurrection. Without the resurrection the Cross stands as a sign of failure and defeat, as a disclosure of the sin and ambiguity of history.⁴¹ Yet from the perspective of the resurrection it can be appreciated as a victory over the forces of darkness, as a triumph in history of the divine, so that the divine not only suffers in history but also triumphs.⁴² That it seems to us is not taken seriously by Niebuhr, and yet needs to be.

Part of the reason for this is that Niebuhr did not believe in the literal resurrection of Jesus, and so it could not really be a victory over anything, other than the disciples victory over their own despair after the crucifixion.⁴³ He writes:

My impression was that historical scholarship seemed to indicate that the story of the empty tomb was an afterthought and that the really

⁴⁰ Charles West, *op. cit.*, p.151.

⁴¹ We are persuaded that this thesis has been adequately demonstrated by Wolfhart Pannenberg in *Jesus - God and Man, op. cit.* "Either Jesus had been a blasphemer or the law of the Jews - and with it Judaism itself as a religion - is done away with. That the latter is the case became clear from the perspective of Jesus' resurrection. Judged in this light the standards are reversed.... Therefore, the message of freedom from the law results from the perspective of the resurrection." p.255.

⁴² Charles West notes that "One can understand Niebuhr's concern in all of this, lest too unguarded an affirmation of Christ's victory in the resurrection play into the hands of some human interest which is less than God's and excuse Christians from wrestling with the duties and conflicts of this sinful world as responsible neighbours." Charles West, *op. cit.*, p.151.

⁴³ So Kenneth Durkin writes in criticism: "Therefore the resurrection of Jesus can be said to be the miracle that a group of people who ran away from the cross because they failed to understand its significance actually came to believe that what they were running away from was of revelatory significance." Kenneth Durkin, *op. cit.*, pp.150.

attested historical fact was the experience of the risen Christ among his various disciples. I accept that fact together with the certainty that the Church was founded upon the assurance that Christ was indeed risen.⁴⁴

Yet, a politically responsible soteriology has to take the literal resurrection of Jesus seriously, otherwise it is impossible to find the note of victory and hope in the Cross of Christ.

For what the resurrection gives then is an angle upon the relationship of redemption to history which goes beyond the weary sense of pessimism that Niebuhr discerns. It opens up a perspective upon the future, upon human destiny, upon the question: "what can we hope for?" It gives the sense of hope and purpose that drives one on in the struggle for justice.

Here we are in touch with one of the more sustained criticisms of Niebuhr, that his vision grew through his engagement with, in Rasmussen's terms, those who "make history rather than 'take' it",⁴⁵ i.e. white, male, first-world, power-controlling shapers of history and thus he exhibits a concomitant pre-occupation with their many moral pitfalls and mistakes.⁴⁶ From this experience there was not a tremendous amount to hope for!

How differently he would sound if he were engaged in a struggle of an oppressed group seeking justice. Hope beyond

⁴⁴ "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism by Reinhold Niebuhr" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.514. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁵ Larry Rasmussen (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.19.

⁴⁶ Thus Larry Rasmussen: "Niebuhr's experience and perspectives, and the circles in which he moved, were largely North Atlantic, largely white, largely male, and certainly those of the influential. He was the piercing critic of these, and an unmasker without peer of the ideology of power and power of ideology." *Op. cit.*, p.33.

the Cross in the resurrection is what drives such struggles.

In South Africa, the *Kairos Document* has made this clear:

At the very heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ and at the very centre of all true prophecy is a message of hope. Jesus has taught us to speak of this hope as the coming of God's Kingdom. We believe that God is at work in our world turning hopeless and evil situations to good so that God's Kingdom may come and God's will may be done on earth as it is in heaven. We believe that goodness and justice and love will triumph in the end and that tyranny and oppression cannot last forever. True peace and true reconciliation are not only desirable, they are assured and guaranteed. This is our faith and our hope.⁴⁷

It is not a question of achieving utopia, but of the drive, energy and commitment that accompanies the hope and longing for the Kingdom of God on earth. We can, and must, still affirm with Niebuhr that we cannot create the Kingdom on earth, and that clearly the coming of the Kingdom brings with it the end of history in the sense that we know it. The full experience of God's grace awaits the eschaton.

The question then is, does the coming Kingdom have anything to say in terms of the practice of justice? Does it only tell us that we should not demonize or divinize politics, or does it tell us something else? We are persuaded that while the Cross certainly discloses the meaning of history in terms of God's judgement and mercy, the Cross also discloses the victory of God over the forces of sin and dehumanization. Thereby it discloses that the coming Kingdom involves victory over the forces of injustice. And this is not a matter of indifference for the practice of justice, but is rather the fountain of hope.

⁴⁷ Kairos Theologians. *The Kairos Document*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p.26.

For we cannot live with the "facts of history", and engage in the practice of justice without hope. Niebuhr's perspective upon justice is informed by the middle-class American dream in which justice is a workable possibility. But there are many communities throughout the world that experience constant injustice. *This is the truth that gives rise to the false soteriology of the "worship of history"*. There arises within the human experience of a suffering people a deep awareness that justice is not established, and that present conditions do not allow for the practice of justice. The hope for a future of justice then becomes an important goad in the practice of justice.⁴⁸ Thus Rubem Alves in his stinging rebuke of Christian realism writes:

Let me say, first, that Christian utopianism (and I use this expression in a positive sense) is not a belief in the possibility of a perfect society but rather the belief in the nonnecessity of *this* imperfect order. It does not claim that it is possible to abolish sin, but it affirms that there is no reason for us to accept the rule of the sinful structure that now control our society.⁴⁹

We can affirm with Niebuhr the fundamental relationship between the Atonement and the eschaton, and that everything disclosed in the Cross awaits its final fulfillment. Yet that future coming expected Kingdom does not just wait for the end of history but impinges upon the present,⁵⁰ so that

⁴⁸ Speaking of Niebuhr's criticisms of utopian hopes, Charles West writes: "Yet these are criticisms which presuppose a stable framework on the basis of which to act in society. It is precisely this which is lacking in so much of the world. The same social values which Niebuhr holds must be asserted as future demand, as objects of creative revolutionary action, if they are to be held at all." Charles West, *op. cit.*, p.170.

⁴⁹ Rubem Alves, "Christian Realism: Ideology of the Establishment" in *Christianity and Crisis* Vol 33 No.15, September 17, 1973. p.175.

⁵⁰ Ruurd Veldhuis, whose book on Niebuhr's theology, *Realism versus Utopianism*, (*op. cit.*), deals mainly with this theme writes: "A theology which does not want to separate God's work and man's acts of

the victory won on the Cross and revealed in the resurrection stands as a challenge and hope for political ethics. The coming Kingdom of God therefore calls forth a justice that hopes in triumph and victory over the "powers and authorities".

In a critical reflection upon Niebuhr that is sensitive to our concern, the Protestant liberation theologian Jose Miguez Bonino writes:

The painful movement of Reinhold Niebuhr from a prophetic denunciation of "the immoral society" to the "realism" of the cold war seems to mark the way of a theology that tries to exorcise all "utopian" and "enthusiastic" tendencies in Christian political ethics: it results in dehistoricizing the Kingdom of God and tolerating and justifying the injustices of the status quo - all in order to minimize offense.⁵¹

And then, while he doesn't use the word "hope", he goes on to argue for the importance the expectation of the coming Kingdom has upon political ethics:

Certainly it would be disastrous to "intromit" the Kingdom of God into politics by way of "policy norms". The real question, however, is whether the Kingdom of God is irrelevant to policy and therefore "existing social processes" are closed in themselves, or whether the Kingdom is a horizon which commits us to an effort at transforming the "existing conditions" in its direction.⁵²

By the time he wrote *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr seems to have forgotten this point he himself articulated in the closing paragraphs of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* which grew out of his political engagement

faithful obedience too rigidly, will have room for utopia as a kind of secularized eschatology, which is not the same as substituting utopia for the Kingdom itself. If taken with a sense of humour (R. Mehl) and if invented with reference to the justice of the Kingdom, utopias may be regarded as parables of the Kingdom". p.143.

⁵¹ Jose Miguez Bonino, *Towards a Christian Political Ethics*.

(Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p.89.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.90.

in Detroit. Against the cautious, "realistic", and ultimately status quo affirming ethic of later years, Niebuhr wrote in 1932:

The illusion is dangerous because it encourages terrible fanaticisms. It must therefore be brought under the control of reason. One can only hope that reason will not destroy it before its work is done".⁵³

It is important to note however, that in this criticism of Niebuhr's understanding of the Atonement we are not thereby questioning his fundamental position nor affirming the "false soteriology" of the worship of history. We are recognizing the importance of expectation and hope in the practice of justice, and we are saying that this can be drawn into the doctrine of the Atonement if the Cross is understood, as it should be, in terms of the *full story of Easter, especially the resurrection*. This, then, is an essential part of a politically responsible soteriology.⁵⁴

⁵³ *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p.277.

⁵⁴ In a similar manner, Ruurd Veldhuis argues that realism and utopianism should not be seen as absolute contradictions: "Realism and utopianism differ in their appeal to respectively experience and reason and imagination, they differ in the emphasis which is given to certain features of human nature, they differ in their assessment of the part which man can play in the historical process, they differ in their valuation of the actual force of ideas and science in the political realm. It is important to recognize all these differences, because they will have important consequences, but it is also important to realize that we are *not dealing with absolute contradictions* which would make any discussion impossible... But must we choose? I think it is *impossible to choose simply between realism and utopianism*, and moreover I think that it is even dangerous to do so." *Op. cit.*, pp.156f. Emphasis mine.

4.3. Atonement and Solidarity (or the Cross and the Full Story of the Gospels).

And they began to call out to him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spat on him. Falling on their knees they worshipped him. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him (Mark 15:18ff.).

He suffered under Pontius Pilate. (The Apostles Creed).

Justice is a vacuous concept unless it is informed by a particular point of reference in society. Thus we may well ask, "Justice for whom?" So any adequate practice of justice needs to be informed not only by the hope of justice, but also by a referent. For all societies are fraught with tensions between various groups whether they be classes, races, sexes, ages, etc. And the demand of justice for one particular group may well mean limitations upon another group which could be perceived as injustice.

It is part of the scriptural tradition that justice is not just "impartial", but must ensure that justice is seen to be done to the "widows, the orphans and the aliens". God is seen to be partial towards the poor and the oppressed, the weak and the marginalized.⁵⁵ In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr took a clear stand for the poor and the workers against the rich and the "captains of industry", but it was grounded in a pragmatic intuition rather than

⁵⁵ This I take to be the consensus of opinion of Biblical scholars and theologians. One of the best treatments of the issues is to be found in Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983). See especially Chapter IV, "The Rich and the Poor", pp.73ff.

specifically in the Christian faith.⁵⁶ A similar concern was expressed in 1935:

The privileged classes of society form an "upper crust." This phrase is literally accurate. It is a crust they form. No matter how good privileged people may be, they will be inclined to defend their interests and with it the old society which guarantees and preserves them. The destructive and constructive force *must come from below*.⁵⁷

However, Niebuhr struggled to ground this "option for the poor" in his understanding of the Christian faith.⁵⁸ Due to his perspective of the all-pervasiveness of sin, there is very little "point of access" within history to determine that the practice of justice demands that one act with this group against another, even though in an ultimate sense both groups stand judged before God. It seems that Niebuhr was searching for a way to express this when he wrote *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. The section on "the equality of sin and the inequality of guilt" is his attempt to find this point beyond relativity. He writes :

⁵⁶ Langdon Gilkey writes of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*: "Not only is Niebuhr here clearly influenced by Marxist thought; he also has what liberation theologians have called a 'tilt towards the oppressed' - though not on any explicitly Christian basis." "Reinhold Niebuhr as Political Theologian" in R. Harries (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.164.

⁵⁷ "Marx, Barth, and Israel's Prophets" in D.B. Robertson (Ed.), *Essays in Applied Christianity*, *op. cit.*, p.162. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁸ This may be one of the reasons why he shows so little interest in poor Christians. Martin Marty notes that "Niebuhr, a man in quest of an American proletariat - who despaired of finding one or seeing it form - devoted surprisingly little attention to the lower-class churches, the forces of the dispossessed.... He treated the black churches almost only in context where he was chastising whites for discrimination. The churches of the Appalachian poor, the white slum dwellers, the Roman Catholic bottom-rung immigrants - all these were treated with passing reference, little curiosity, and little detailed knowledge." Martin Marty, "Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience" in N.A. Scott, Jr. (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.22. We should remember, however, that Niebuhr remained involved for a long time in the Delta Cooperative Farm, which involved poor whites and poor blacks working together. See Ronald Stone, "The Contribution of Reinhold Niebuhr to the Late Twentieth-Century" in C.W. Kegley, (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.64.

It is important to recognize that Biblical religion has emphasized this inequality of guilt just as much as the equality of sin... Specially severe judgements fall upon the rich and the powerful, the mighty and the noble, the wise and the righteous...

The prophetic note of moral discrimination between rich and poor, between the powerful and the weak, the proud and the meek is maintained in the New Testament..."⁵⁹

Yet the sad fact is that in the face of criticism Niebuhr specifically retracted this concept.⁶⁰

In giving up on the admittedly weak formula that opposed sin and guilt, he nevertheless gave up on the idea that within a given society there are victims and victimizers, and that the practice of justice may and usually does require a clear choice for the one against the other.

The question then remains as to what exactly is the point of reference within the struggle for justice. Caught up as we all are within the hermeneutics of our own interests we have few clear guidelines as to the contours of the practice of justice. Niebuhr is critical of the Reformation idea that our practice of justice should be governed by scripture on the grounds of "bibliolatry".⁶¹

⁵⁹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I, p.222.

⁶⁰ In reference to a criticism from William John Wolf, Niebuhr writes: "He is right in criticizing my idea of "equality of sin and inequality of guilt" as elaborated in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. I have been convinced for some time that this was an error. I sought to do justice to the fact that there is in fact great distinction between forms of evil, that the saint and the criminal are not at all alike but that yet in the ultimate instance it is true that "In God's sight no man living is justified." It is not, however, adequate to explain this situation in quantitative terms. I remain baffled in my search for an adequate description of the situation which will allow for discriminate judgements between good and evil on the one hand, and which will, in the other, preserve the Biblical affirmation that all men fall short before God's judgement". Reinhold Niebuhr, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.513.

⁶¹ See the comments: "When the Bible becomes an authoritative compendium of social, economic, political and scientific knowledge it is used as a vehicle of the sinful sanctification of relative standards of knowledge and virtue which happen to be enshrined in a religious canon." *The*

Yet his own answer to the question - the use of human intelligence - while rightly being more open to creative thinking still does not solve the problem as to whom justice must serve.

It is our contention that it is this that leads Niebuhr to struggle in his ethics to be clearly on the side of the victims in society. As his doctrine of the Atonement stands, it is a radical critique of all human attempts to build the "Kingdom on earth", and the corollary of this is the belief that in this messy business of historical existence a "balance of power" therefore ensures justice. This is essentially the thesis of *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* which he wrote immediately after *The Nature and Destiny of Man*.

Interestingly enough the Niebuhr of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* provides a thorough critique of this very theory, in that it is the people in power who get to decide what the correct balance is. In a way, this is the truth within the false soteriology of the "denial of history". So often such a perspective arises out of the awareness of the inhospitability of history and the failure of politics to

Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol II, p.152.; and again: "Calvin's 'divine law', in which he finds an answer to every moral and social problem, is nicely defined here. For it is a compendium collected from 'various places in Scripture,' without reference to the historical relativities which are enshrined in a sacred canon. This is the ethical corollary in Calvin's system of his general Biblicism not to say Bibliolatry.... Calvin's conception of 'divine law' has the advantage of consistency over Luther's sketchy directives in the field of social and political life. But it nevertheless combines the errors of both obscurantism and pretension. It is obscurantist in that it does not sufficiently engage man's rational capacities in determining what is just and unjust in his relation to his fellows. It appeals prematurely to Biblical authority for answers to every conceivable moral and social problem." *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, pp.202f.

ever really effect a change in the relationship between the powerful and the powerless, the victims and the victimizers.

The truth that is uncovered by those who seek salvation in the denial of history is that history is the story of suffering, oppression, poverty, injustice. There seems to be no answer but escape, no salvation but denial. It correctly identifies that it is the victims that desire redemption, and it offers them a chance of salvation, seemingly in defiance of the reality of their lives.

We have said enough elsewhere to clarify our rejection of the "denial of history", but we would do well to acknowledge the truth of this protest against the meaningfulness of history in the light of suffering that leads people to deny any redemptive significance to history. We need to hear this cry from the heart of the victims of history that history itself is oppressive, and redemption comes by denying history. The practice of justice has to take this character of history seriously. Justice cannot be a reality unless it is related to the real experience of suffering and injustice in history.

If we feel firstly that Niebuhr does not give enough space to the need for *hope* in the practice of justice, our second criticism is that he fails to deal with the theme of *solidarity* in suffering. And again we feel that the doctrine of the Atonement can be opened to this issue in a way that Niebuhr failed to do. If we can see the relationship to hope by going *forward* from the Cross to the *resurrection* of Jesus, then we can see this relationship to solidarity by going *backward* from the Cross to his *life and*

his trial. The doctrine of the Atonement must therefore understand the Cross as part of the full story of the Gospels.

There is no doubt that Niebuhr felt uncomfortable with the historical Jesus. There is very little mention of him, his actions, his teaching. The suspicion is that Jesus is approached as a "symbol" and part of a "mythos", rather than as a specific person in history. As John Flynn puts it, "one is compelled to say that Niebuhr is not speaking of a living active concrete person but of an abstraction, a platonic ideal".⁶²

Jan Milic Lochmann comments:

It seems to me that Niebuhr did not steer free of this danger in his "mythical" and "symbolical" Christology. In spite of all his extraordinary historical sense, his sense of the reality of the incarnation is somehow vague. He accepts the symbolism of "God-man" and even the "myth of Christ" and the "idea of transcendent Christ". But he has nothing to say about his concrete reality.⁶³

Theodore Minnema makes a similar comment:

The existential categories through which Niebuhr interprets the doctrine of the incarnation has serious effects on this doctrine as traditionally understood. That "the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us," is drained of its real historical content. Christ, instead of being in the flesh, becomes a mysterious reality in a realm transcending the grasp of the human mind. He becomes a being beyond human observation and description. He is a paradox, strange to all the contents of history.⁶⁴

⁶² John Flynn, *op. cit.*, p.120.

⁶³ J.M. Lochman, "The Problem of Realism in R. Niebuhr's Christology" in *The Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol 11, September 1958. pp.257ff. Lochman is here referring to the Christology of *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics and Beyond Tragedy*, but later argues that the same shortcoming is found in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. See the note on p.262.

⁶⁴ Theodore Minnema, *op. cit.*, pp.108ff.

Larry Rasmussen is perhaps more accurate when he comments that Niebuhr's picture of Jesus was not so much of a "symbol" as a development of Troeltsch's Jesus of "a free personal piety".⁶⁵

Forsaking the Jesus of the synoptics, Niebuhr prefers to relate to Jesus through the theology of Paul. So what we miss in Niebuhr's reading of *Jesus' life and the story of the Cross* is the Jesus who expresses a solidarity with the poor and the weak.

For example, Niebuhr refers to the "Christ, who was powerless in history and in whom no particular cause or force in history triumphed or was vindicated".⁶⁶ This picture of Christ as the one who because of his expression of agape-love, opted out of the power structures of his day, cannot go unchallenged.⁶⁷ Indeed as people in the Third World have discovered in their reading of the life of Jesus, he took a very decided position on power, namely siding with the powerless and poor against the powerful and rich. Niebuhr is right in speaking of powerlessness, but wrong in assuming that this means that no particular cause in history triumphed.

⁶⁵ "Troeltsch's Jesus of 'a free personal piety' without a developed social ethic, one who heroically embodied a moral ideal that put him beyond power conflicts, is not the Jesus of many Social Gospel liberals Niebuhr knew. But it was largely Niebuhr's Jesus. It mirrored the liberalism of Adolf Harnack as well, whose theology Niebuhr learned from his father. In a correction of Troeltsch and Harnack, Niebuhr did see in Jesus a grave threat to the political and religious authorities, a threat that led to his crucifixion." Larry Rasmussen (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.25f.

⁶⁶ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.145.

⁶⁷ In his summary of the debate surrounding Niebuhr's picture of Jesus, Larry Rasmussen argues that Niebuhr's picture of Jesus has to change in the light of modern scholarship. *Op. cit.*, pp.39f.

Frank Chikane writes:

If we understand incarnation in terms of the life and attitudes of the historical Jesus then it must be clear that incarnation means making a preferential option for the victims and against the victimizer. Did not the historical Jesus choose to identify and live with the poor, the blind, the sick, and the hungry thus deliberately associating with a particular class of people in that society? Did not the historical Jesus refuse to be made a king? Did he not rebuke the Pharisees, the chief Priests and the Scribes?⁶⁸

This deeper appreciation of the political role of Jesus has also led to a deeper appreciation of crucifixion. This is for us the central "referent" in disclosing God's solidarity with victims in society. Chikane continues the above paragraph with a specific mention of the Cross:

Did he not die the death of a criminal after being sentenced for high treason in the hands of the Church leadership and political rulers?⁶⁹

The Cross surely shows that the justice of God remains, but it also shows that that justice has a particular relationship of solidarity to the victims of injustice. What is important about this understanding of the Cross as solidarity with the poor is that it provides a point of political access beyond the relativity of the all-pervasiveness of sin.

Certainly, all people stand judged before God because of their role in sending Jesus to his death. Yet the creed tells us "he suffered under Pontius Pilate",⁷⁰ and that

⁶⁸ Frank Chikane, "The Incarnation in the Life of the People in Southern Africa" in *The Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, Vol 51, June 1985, p.46.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.46

⁷⁰ In his analysis of this phrase of the Creed Karl Barth has written: "This name in connexion with the Passion of Christ makes it unmistakably clear that this Passion of Jesus Christ, this unavailing of man's rebellion and of God's wrath, yet also of His mercy, did not take place in heaven or in some remote planet or even in some world of ideas; it

those in positions of power are somehow more implicated in the death of Jesus, because they continue to cause suffering and injustice in history.⁷¹ Niebuhr's understanding of the Cross therefore does not take seriously the *full story of the Gospels*. Perhaps the most important point is that not only does he struggle with the historical Christ, his doctrine of the Atonement struggled with the historicity of the crucifixion itself. It is only in *Faith and History* that Niebuhr deals in any way with the details of the synoptic passion narratives, and then only with the representative nature of the Roman and Jewish authorities, and with the other two people crucified with him. Kenneth Durkin writes:

The significance of the disciples, the women, the betrayal, the denial, the dereliction of Jesus, the centurion's faith, the rending of the temple veil, etc. are not considered in this context.⁷²

Yet our passage from the synoptics quoted at the beginning of this section reminds us that we need to understand the crucifixion of Jesus in continuity with his life and his arrest and torture. This places it within a

took place in our time, in the centre of the world-history in which our human life is played out. So we must not escape from this life." Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (London: SCM, ET 1949), p.109.

⁷¹ Again Karl Barth makes the point: "State order, State power, as represented by Pontius Pilate *vis-a-vis* Jesus is made visible in its negative form, in all its human perversion and unrighteousness. One may indeed say that if anywhere the State is visible as the State of wrong, it is here; and if anywhere the State has been exposed and politics has proved itself to be a monster, then once more it is here.... The passion of Christ becomes the unmasking, the judging, the condemnation of this Beast, whose name is *polis*." Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, *op. cit.*, p.111. I agree with Barth's point that the "passion of Christ becomes..the condemnation of this Beast", but I would not identify the beast with politics in itself (the demonization of politics!), but rather with the state as representatives of the ruling class (in any given situation).

⁷² Kenneth Durkin, *op. cit.*, p.150.

specific context in history, and indicates Jesus' position in society.

The debate about Niebuhr's understanding of the Cross in terms of myth and historicity is captured in this exchange between Richard Fox and Roger Shinn:

Fox, who raised the issue of myth in the first place, challenged Ramsey. "For Niebuhr, the cross is symbol," declared Fox. "Perhaps it's the central symbol in human history, but it's nevertheless ultimately a symbol. In the end he was less interested in the historicity of this event, the facticity of it, whether it really happened and was an actual breakthrough of the supernatural. These concepts didn't mean that much to Niebuhr. He was much more interested in viewing the cross symbolically".

At this point Roger Shinn challenged Fox: "In his encounter with Bultmann and Tillich, Niebuhr came to emphasize more and more the bloody, sweating man hanging on the cross - that real human being. The word "myth", which has many definitions, can refer to a story that isn't literally true but has meaning - like the Genesis story. Or it can refer to a story that's literally true but bears a weight of meaning far beyond the literal. I believe that if you're going to call the Christ event a myth - as Niebuhr often did - it's a myth in that second sense. It was very important to Niebuhr - above all in relation to Tillich and Bultmann - that the Christ even was an actual occurrence that's recorded in the Gospels."⁷³

The fact that there can be debate on the matter suggests that Niebuhr was not very clear about this issue.⁷⁴

However, whether he took the whole story of the Gospel

⁷³ In Paul T. Stallworth, "The Story of an Encounter" in R.J. Neuhaus (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.107f. In correspondence, Roger Shinn reaffirms his position. April 26, 1991.

⁷⁴ See Alan Richardson's commenting on Niebuhr's interpretation of "the sign of Jonah": "These words would seem to mean that 'the sign of the prophet Jonah' is concerned with the general ethical message about a metaphorical death and resurrection as a means of attaining love, joy and peace. They do not apparently refer to the specific, once-for-all death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, under Pontius Pilate, and to the specific Resurrection of this same Jesus Christ on the third day. Or do they? We cannot tell. Is the 'solidly historical' Jesus still the bearer of no more than a pale truism?" in "Reinhold Niebuhr as Apologist" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.* p.303.

seriously or not, Niebuhr's doctrine of the Atonement did not take Jesus suffering as solidarity with the poor and the victims of history. It is vital to recognize the cutting edge this understanding of the Atonement would have given to his political ethics, and this must become a central element in a politically responsible soteriology. For without the "option of the poor" expressed in the Cross political morality is swallowed up in a morass of bourgeois relativity.



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4.4. Atonement and Reconciliation (or the Cross and the Full Story of the New Testament).

His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in the one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility" (Ephesians 2:15f.)

I Believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints. (The Apostles Creed).

We have affirmed Niebuhr's position that the political ethics flowing out of the Atonement of Christ is best understood as the practice of justice. Yet we have also come to see that justice is not a simple thing to grasp, and that a great failing on the part of Niebuhr was that once he had shown the relationship between the Atonement and justice, he did not go on to lay out the significance of the Atonement for justice on the important themes of *solidarity* and *hope*. Niebuhr's understanding of the practice of justice was therefore subject to an "ideological drift".

There is a third theme that is significant for the practice of justice best understood as *reconciliation*. The practice of justice cannot simply be a political programme with no significance for the lives of the people in society. Justice can only really be said to be happening when it is accompanied by the development of authentic relationships between people and between groups of people.

Part of the reason for this is that *memory*, and particularly collective memory, is a tremendously powerful force within society. People carry the hurts and scars that flow from the ambiguities of history. The deep experience of suffering we looked at in the previous section is

something that is carried forward in time in the memory of people. And it can have significant effect upon both the practice of justice and of injustice.

And so part of the practice of justice is the learning to transcend the past, and to seek reconciliation. Reconciliation without justice is of course not reconciliation at all, but likewise, justice without reconciliation is also not justice at all. The true practice of justice involves loving, forgiving, reconciled relationships in history.

However we have seen that while Niebuhr is very clear on the place of the Atonement as mercy to the individual person, he gives scant attention to the role of the Cross as a reconciling force in society. He does speak of agape-love as an outcome of the Christian's response to the suffering love of Jesus on the Cross, but he does not deal with the fact that the Cross not only affects "moral man", but also "immoral society", and that the doctrine of the Atonement has to take seriously the fact that not only does the individual live under grace, but the community does too; and just as the individual is saved and yet still a sinner, so too is the community reconciled and yet still divided.

The community of reconciliation under grace is of course the church, to which Niebuhr gives virtually no attention.

W.J. Wolf notes this:

At the very point of his greatest contribution there is a critical omission in Niebuhr's social picture of redemption. He articulates the relevance of Christian redemption for culture and civilization in their historical problems and he envisages in the "symbols" of the Second Coming and the Resurrection of the Body the final

corporate or social redemption of history. But what of the Church which the New Testament presents as God's instrument for continuing his atoning work in Christ?⁷⁵

For the creed speaks of "the holy catholic church, the communion of saints" existing through the power of the Spirit. The church exists within history as a reconciled and reconciling community and as a sign for the society around it.⁷⁶ This is an aspect of justice that Niebuhr hardly deals with at all.⁷⁷

Here again we must fault Niebuhr's application of the doctrine of the Atonement to the question of human destiny, and thus to the practice of justice. For as the Pauline⁷⁸ reflection in Ephesians suggests, *reconciliation is a significant part of the work of the Cross*. The full implication of the doctrine of the Atonement cannot stop at the setting free of the individual for the practice of justice, but also gives to it the implication of the reconciliation.

A full articulation of the doctrine of the Atonement, therefore, must relate the Cross not only to *the full story of Easter* (hope), and not only to *the full story of the Gospels* (solidarity), but also to *the full story of the New Testament* - i.e. the work of the resurrected Jesus through

⁷⁵ William John Wolf, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.324.

⁷⁶ Ruurd Veldhuis writes: "If the Christian church really takes God's experiment with the world seriously, could it not be expected that the Christian community would provide a fertile soil for experiments that provisionally realize something of the 'freedom of God's children?'" Ruurd Veldhuis, *op. cit.*, p.160.

⁷⁷ Kenneth Durkin represents a vocal minority opinion when he argues that Niebuhr does in fact deal adequately with the church. Kenneth Durkin, *op. cit.*, pp.92ff.

⁷⁸ Whilst Ephesians was probably not written by Paul himself, it is sufficiently "Pauline" to warrant being included in the Pauline corpus.

the Holy Spirit (reconciliation). The significance and implication of the Cross must be understood in continuity with the reconciling work of the Holy Spirit in forming "the holy catholic church, the community of saints" in history.

Yet Niebuhr struggles to deal with the Holy Spirit,⁷⁹ and in so doing, he struggles with a number of important themes which belong to the third article of the creed. John Howard Yoder has commented

The common denominator of the above-mentioned doctrines of resurrection, the church, and regeneration is that all are works of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is likewise neglected in Niebuhr's ethics. In the New Testament the coming of the Spirit means the imparting of power and that power is not a mythological symbol for the infinite perfectibility of human rationality but rather a working reality within history and especially within the church.⁸⁰

We have noted that Niebuhr maintains an "eschatological reserve" with regard to the experience of grace as a "power in" people, which he also described as "synonymous with the gifts of the Holy Spirit",⁸¹ and which we labeled "grace as *charisma*". It is clear that this whole area of Christian

⁷⁹ John Flynn quotes Rachel Hadley King's major work, *The Omission of the Holy Spirit from Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology*: "The Holy Spirit is of no importance in Niebuhr's theology. Why is this possible? It is not a mere omission. Since the Holy Spirit is that aspect of the divine activity that enters the world and establishes personal relations with men by direct influence on their lives, since Niebuhr led by an excessive regard for the authority of positive science considers creation as a closed system not open to divine intervention, it necessarily follows that there is no role for the Holy Spirit in Niebuhr's theology and the God of Niebuhr (one who does not break the creation barrier) is very close to that of the 18th century group called Deists" Quoted in John Flynn, *op. cit.*, pp.120f. This is also the central criticism that Paul Lehmann raises against Niebuhr's Christology: "Is it not almost wholly preoccupied with the relations between the Father and the Son to the exclusion of the relations between the Son and the Spirit?". In "The Christology of Reinhold Niebuhr", in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.353.

⁸⁰ John Howard Yoder, *op. cit.*, p.22.

⁸¹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol II, p.99.

faith, the experienced reality of redemption in history, or what is usually called "sanctification", is held in great suspicion by Niebuhr. It is too close to the false soteriology of "the completion of history". So even when he can admit to an appreciation of the church, he writes:

The Church is the one place in history where life is kept open for the final word of God's judgement to break the pride of men and for the word of God's mercy to lift up the broken hearted... But when I see how much new evil comes into life through the pretensions of the religious community, through its conventional and graceless legalism and through religious fanaticism, I am concerned that my growing appreciation of the Church should not betray me into this complacency.⁸²

And again:

We must admit that there is no guarantee in any theology or form of worship that a community of faith, which intends to bring men into contact with the true God, may not be used for essentially idolatrous purposes. Men may use it to claim a special allegiance with God against their foes.⁸³

Niebuhr is right. When we speak of "the holy catholic church, the communion of saints" we should make clear that this is no arrogant ecclesiasticism. The church exists as a sign community for what is possible in the world, and it is guilty of the same failings of any historical institution.⁸⁴

⁸² Reinhold Niebuhr, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.513.

⁸³ "Intellectual Autobiography of Reinhold Niebuhr", in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.22.

⁸⁴ It is interesting that the whole area of ecclesiology is one that features prominently in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's essay on the church in the United States, "Protestantism without Reformation" which he wrote after studying with Niebuhr. He writes: "The claim to be the church of Jesus Christ has nothing to do with Pharisaic arrogance; it is rather a recognition which is humbling because it leads to repentance. The church is a church of sinners and not of the righteous. There can be more self-righteousness in renouncing the claim to be a church than in the claim itself. This renunciation can conceal a false humility which desires something better, more pious, than the church which God has chosen from sinners." In John de Gruchy (Ed.), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ (op. cit.)*.

Yet the point is that within the Christian tradition there is a significant theme, flowing out of the Cross, that a community of reconciliation can be established and flourish in history. Robert Fitch notes that

even though perfect love is defeated in history - as Niebuhr likes to remind us - does it not also have its moments of triumph and its continuities of power? After the Resurrection there is Pentecost, and there is the community of hopeful believers, and all these things are creative forces in history.⁸⁵

The church may not claim to be the perfect community.

It may not claim to have overcome all tension and conflict.

It may not claim to practice absolute justice.

Nevertheless, within the confines of the ambiguities of history it stands as a sign of forgiveness, and a pointer to the character of justice. This is missing in Niebuhr's theology, argues William Lazareth:

And because there are no signs of the inbreaking Kingdom for Niebuhr - only symbolical, interpretative, hermeneutical tools for evaluating experience - there's no place for the Kingdom being prefigured in the people of God gathered around the risen Christ as a model for true community as well as the realization of true personhood.⁸⁶

And Charles West makes the same criticism:

He nowhere describes the outline, even of a tolerable reflection of the Kingdom of God, such as we find in Brunner's person-in-community, in Berdyaev's personalist socialism, or in Tillich's theonomous culture.⁸⁷

This yearning to end conflict and tension in history is of course the truth in the false soteriology of "the

⁸⁵ Robert E. Fitch, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Philosophy of History" in C.W. Kegley (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.371.

⁸⁶ In Paul T. Stallsworth, "The Story of an Encounter" in R.J. Neuhaus (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p.118.

⁸⁷ Charles West, *op. cit.*, p.118.

completing of history". There is a natural human desire to overcome all the things that divide us from each other and establish the perfect reconciled community in history, the Kingdom of God on earth. The truth of this false scheme of redemption is that the practice of justice must somehow be related to the building of community. As Kenneth Durkin notes, Niebuhr could have, but did not recognize in "general" revelation

the feeling of longing for social harmony. It is an inexplicable omission on Niebuhr's part, especially in the light of his constant interpretation of eschatology in social rather than individual terms.⁸⁸

While affirming the truth in "the *completing of history*". we need also, in keeping with the whole thrust of this thesis, to affirm the basic thrust of Niebuhr's understanding of the Atonement, that it remains a *false soteriology*, and that we need to be very careful how we understand the relationship of reconciliation to justice. We are not talking here of claims to have achieved the liberated community. What we are suggesting is that the practice of justice must involve the building of community.

Niebuhr's theology struggles to deal with this aspect of the Atonement. This is clearly revealed in his discussion of the "Fall". As we noted above, the Fall for Niebuhr is not to be taken "literally", by which he means that "paradise" never existed in history, because historicity implies sin; but it is rather the contemplative state before any action.

⁸⁸ Kenneth Durkin, *op. cit.*, p.105.

In contemplation the transcendent spirit can experience the freedom of Eden, but sin enters the world the moment action follows. This is of course allied with his understanding of power in the real world, in that no society can be held together except by some level of coercive power, and therefore any communal relations are tainted by sin.

South African theology, especially in the debate that surrounded the question of the theological justification of apartheid being a "heresy", took a different position on the meaning of the Fall, and saw the Cross as offering reconciliation and the restoring of a lost community *within history*. The analysis and critique of apartheid by the South African theologian, Archbishop Desmond Tutu illustrates this clearly.

Tutu's basic position which he draws on again and again can be described simply as follows: Firstly God creates us and there exists true human community in history; secondly sin enters in the picture and relationships are distorted with the Tower of Babel story being an illustration of the results of sin rather than of God's plan; thirdly, God constantly draws his people away from the reality of this sin - the Exodus and the prophets; fourthly Christ comes to restore the broken creation and community; and fifthly, the church has the responsibility of proclaiming and expressing that restored community.

Apartheid is thus indefensible for Christians because it argues that God's intention is broken community, whereas the Bible shows that the Divine Intention is true community,

justice and love, and Christ's death on the Cross has made this possible.

Tutu dwells on this overriding framework, and brings it to a head in his essay appropriately entitled, "The Divine Intention" which was submitted as a defence of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) to the government appointed Eloff Commission of Inquiry into the SACC:

... the Bible describes God as creating the universe to be a cosmos and not a chaos, a cosmos in which harmony, unity, order, fellowship, communion, peace and justice would reign and that this divine intention was disturbed by sin. The result was disunity, alienation, disorder, chaos, separation, and in the face of this God then sent His Son to restore that primordial harmony to effect reconciliation.... Consequently, from a theological and Scriptural base, I will demonstrate that apartheid ... is evil, totally and without remainder, that it is unchristian and unbiblical.⁸⁹

As we will see, Niebuhr found apartheid to be unjust and morally indefensible. But without taking into account the "Cross as reconciliation", he could not advance this kind of penetrating critique against apartheid. Indeed, his argument that within history there can be no true reconciliation between peoples is a very similar to the primary pillar in the whole theological justification of Apartheid. Against this we affirm with the *Belhar Confession*

that God by his lifegiving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity...;⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Desmond Tutu, "The Divine Intention" in *Hope and Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

⁹⁰ "Belhar Confession of Faith, 1982" in Charles Villa-Vicencio (Ed.), *Between Christ and Caesar* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p.243. See the essays on the Confession in G.D. Cloete, and D.J. Smit, (Eds.), A

In other words, the meaning of the Cross is not just for individuals in their own internal lives dealing with the anxieties and temptations of historical existence, but has also to do with the relationships between individuals. Whilst Niebuhr correctly argues that the meaning of history can only be from the perspective of the "forgiveness of sins" it is clear, from the Biblical witness, that God's forgiveness of sins is vitally related to our willingness to forgive our neighbour. God's mercy shown on the Cross thus draws us to reconciling mercy for one another.

In this regard, a number of interpreters have noted how seldom Niebuhr took the opportunity in the Cold War to seek reconciliation with Communists or Russians. They were always defined as "the enemy", and there was no place even for appreciating their humanity or for working together. For example, Niebuhr was clear that the Union for Democratic Action (UDA), which he helped to found, could never admit Communists as members.⁹¹ Its successor which Niebuhr also helped to found, the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), barred not only Communists but also "sympathizers with Communists".⁹² Charles West comments upon this:

He is concerned with the history of human effort, pride, contrition and responsibility, tempered by God's relation to it. Yet his emphasis remains curiously humanistic, even when pessimistically so. The personal God who calls and redeems in Christ, leading us to concrete personal relation with him and our neighbour in faith, is rarely brought to the fore.

Therefore the whole question of the Christian's personal ministry to the Communist as

Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

⁹¹ See Richard Fox, *op. cit.*, p.200.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p.230.

a neighbour does not come up. He has no suggestions on the complex problem of the relation between the Communist as a fanatic of his creed and the Communist as human being made of God.⁹³

This has lead Ronald Stone to comment:

Niebuhr has seen more clearly the real conflicts of interest than he has the mutual interests of the antagonists. He has, in the words of his famous prayer, looked for patience to endure when he could have been seeking courage to change the course of the conflict.⁹⁴

We rest our case.



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⁹³ Charles West, *op. cit.*, p.174. Emphasis mine.

⁹⁴ Ronald Stone, *op. cit.*, p.216.

4.5. Conclusion.

In this thesis we have argued that the category of redemption, and therefore soteriology, is a fundamental hermeneutical key for understanding Niebuhr's thought. We have illustrated this through an analysis of this critique of other worldviews, and then an analysis of how his own theology and ethics is best understood as flowing out of his articulation of the doctrine of the Atonement.

We have seen that Niebuhr considers the worldviews' promotion of liberation to be a false relationship of redemption to history, and we have therefore characterized the *denial*, the *worship*, and the *completing* of history as false soteriologies. Whilst considering the weakness illustrated by Niebuhr, we have in our final chapter also noted the truth within each "type" of soteriology with which the worldviews sought to give expression.

In our analysis of Niebuhr's use of the doctrine of the Atonement, we have affirmed his basic contention that the relationship between redemption and history is best characterized as the practice of justice. In this final chapter we have argued that the great strength of this position is that it safeguards against both the demonization and the divinization of politics.

However, we have gone on to criticize Niebuhr's understanding of justice, arguing that it is defective on three counts. We have argued that given that his understanding of justice rises out of the doctrine of the Atonement, a deeper analysis of this doctrine could have opened up his perspective of justice in ways that could have

overcome his "ideological drift", and dealt creatively with some of the truths within the "false soteriologies".

First, we noted that the truth that the *worship* of history affirms is that people need the hope of a better future to live by. Whilst with Niebuhr we cannot affirm its conclusion that redemption therefore lies in worshipping history, we argue that any attempt to practice justice must take seriously the hope that is needed for overcoming injustice. Niebuhr failed to do this, and we have argued that this was a failing in his interpretation of the doctrine of the Atonement. In the doctrine of the Atonement, the Cross must be related to *the full story of Easter*, particularly the *victory* that is won through the resurrection. This allows us to relate to the *hope* of present experiences of injustice being overcome in the practice of justice.

Second, we noted that the truth that the *denial* of history affirms is the meaninglessness of the suffering and injustice of history. Whilst with Niebuhr we cannot affirm its conclusion that redemption therefore lies in denying history, we argue that any attempt to practice justice must take seriously the perspective of the victims and powerless in history. Niebuhr failed to do this, and we have argued that this was a failing in his interpretation of the doctrine of the Atonement. In the doctrine of the Atonement, the Cross must be related to *the full story of the Gospels*, the life, words and works of Jesus, and also his arrest, trial and torture. This allows us to relate the

Atonement to *solidarity* with the victims and powerless in the practice of Justice.

Third, we noted that the truth that the *completing* of history affirms is that people yearn for an experience in which the ambiguities and alienations of history are laid aside. Whilst with Niebuhr we cannot affirm its conclusion that redemption therefore lies in completing history, we argue that any attempt to practice justice must take seriously the longing for community. Niebuhr failed to do this, and we have argued that this was a failing in his interpretation of the doctrine of the Atonement. In the doctrine of the Atonement, the Cross must be related to the *full story of the New Testament*, in other word, as the work of the Holy Spirit in drawing people and groups of people together in community. This allows us to relate to the need for *reconciliation* in the practice of justice.

It is our belief that we have successfully articulated Niebuhr's own thought and have identified the fundamental truth that he establishes, namely that human destiny, the relationship of redemption to history, in the light of the Christian doctrine of the Atonement is best understood as the practice of justice. Furthermore that we have provided a critique of his understanding of justice growing out of the centre of his own theological and ethical system, the doctrine of the Atonement.

Finally, therefore, we argue that a politically responsible soteriology must understand human destiny as *not liberation but justice*; Yet a justice that lives with the hope of overcoming injustice, that stands in solidarity with

the victims of history, and that seeks reconciled community;
all three taking seriously that in the end history has
meaning only through the grace of God.



EXCURSUS: REINHOLD NIEBUHR ON SOUTH AFRICA.

This case study on Reinhold Niebuhr is not part of the argument of the thesis, but is presented as an excursus to provide a glimpse of Reinhold Niebuhr, the theologian, at work. There are many other, perhaps more significant, themes that could have been chosen such as Niebuhr's thought on the Palestinian question, the Second World War, Vietnam or the race situation in the United States. Yet it seems to us that this excursus on South Africa can serve three useful roles.

First, it illustrates the broad themes that we have identified above: the preacher and prophet speaking to the church, academy and the wider society about the human responsibility for justice in the light of the Gospel. While these themes can be discerned in the material, it should be borne in mind, however, that the incidental nature of Niebuhr's writings on South Africa means that we are not able to provide a comprehensive overview and detailed illustration of all these themes. The doctrine of the Atonement is not mentioned at all, though justice is the underlying theme throughout.

Secondly, it gives us a small glimpse of Niebuhr's understanding of some of the issues and problems of South Africa. That Niebuhr entered into dialogue with the South African situation may be a surprise for some. That he was able to transcend his tendency to view third-world issues through the lense of the Cold War may be a surprise to others.¹ This case study should therefore help to build up a broader picture of Niebuhr's thought.

¹ We should note, however, one passing reference to the Cold War. He expressed his concern that "racial injustice generates Communism in Africa quite spontaneously and without too much propaganda." See "The South African Tragedy", *Christianity and Society*, Vol 20, No.2, 1955.

Thirdly, this study acts as a bridge between Niebuhr's thought and theology on the one hand and some South African applications on the other. This is interesting to one who would reflect upon a political ethics for South Africa in dialogue with Niebuhr. There are many surprising things that emerge from Niebuhr's reflections upon South Africa, and much with which we can agree. Yet there are perhaps other places where with the benefit of hindsight we would want to part company with him. His own thought on South Africa, however, is an important place to begin such a dialogue.

1. Review of the Sources.

Niebuhr did not examine the South African situation in much detail. Nevertheless there are a number of references to South Africa in some of his books² and journal articles,³ and there are nine Journal articles and one book review that focus specifically upon South Africa. These are:

² See *Love and Justice*, p.225; *The Structure of Nations and Empires*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), pp. 156,173,214.

³ "The Supreme Court on Segregation in the Schools", *Christianity and Crisis*, June 14, 1954. Reprinted in *Love and Justice*. pp.151f. There is also a positive reference to the then South African Prime Minister, Jan Smuts in "Power, Politics and Justice", *Christianity and Society*, Vol 9, No 1, 1943, pp.5-8.

1952	May	"South African Religious Racism"	<i>The Messenger</i> . ⁴
	Summer	"Dutch Calvinism in South Africa"	<i>Christianity and Society</i> . ⁵
1955	January	"Editorial Notes"	<i>Christianity and Crisis</i> . ⁶
	Spring	"The South African Tragedy"	<i>Christianity and Society</i> . ⁷
	May	"A Thorn in the Flesh", (Review of T. Huddleston's <i>Naught for your Comfort</i> .)	<i>The New Republic</i> . ⁸
1957	August	"South African Race Struggle"	<i>The Lutheran</i> . ⁹
	September	"Tragedy in South Africa"	<i>The Messenger</i> . ¹⁰
	September	"Church and State in South Africa",	<i>Advance</i> . ¹¹
1960	May	"The Church and the South African Tragedy"	<i>Christianity and Crisis</i> . ¹²
	May	"Cold Comfort of a 'Mystic Unity'"	<i>Christianity and Crisis</i> . ¹³

As one can see they span a period of nine years (1952 to 1960 inclusive), and were published in six different journals. The two articles in September 1957 are identical save that the one in *Advance* has some of the less important sentences omitted.¹⁴

⁴ Vol 17, No.10. May 6, 1952, p.7.

⁵ Vol 17, No.3, Summer 1952. p.7.

⁶ Vol 14, no. 23. January 10, 1955. pp.178-179.

⁷ Vol 20, No.2. Spring, 1955. pp.4-5.

⁸ Vol 134, No.22. May 28, 1956, pp.20-21.

⁹ Vol 39, No.47. August 21, 1957, p.23.

¹⁰ Vol 22, No.17. September 3, 1957, p.5.

¹¹ Vol 149, No.16. September 6, 1957. p.6.

¹² Vol 20, No.7. May 2, 1960 pp.53-54.

¹³ Vol 20, No.8. May 16, 1960 pp.65-66.

¹⁴ Note that from here on, the footnotes refer to the title of the article only. Please refer to the notes above for bibliographical details.

2. Commentary upon South African Events.

Like many United States commentators upon South African events, Niebuhr is prone to simplifications and misunderstandings. His "Americanisms" are evident as is his continual misuse of words and intermittent spelling errors. The *broederbond*, for example is Germanized to become the *broederbund*,¹⁵ and Sophiatown becomes a quaint British Sophietown!¹⁶ Perhaps more serious is his constant reference throughout to the *Dutch*, and the *Negroes* of South Africa. Both terms are of course meaningless in South Africa and no doubt were chosen to help North Americans understand South Africa, but one wonders at what cost.

Given these few surface limitations it is important to note, however, that on the whole he does display a good grasp of the situation in South Africa. This is clear from the way he reflects upon some events in South Africa in these journal articles.

Over the nine years he dealt with the criticism of Apartheid by an Dutch Reformed Church (DRC)¹⁷ dominee (1952)¹⁸ (possibly Ben Marais);¹⁹ the coming to power of Prime Minister J.G. Strijdom and the plan to secede from the British Commonwealth in 1955;²⁰ the destruction of Sophiatown and the prophetic role played by the missionary Trevor Huddleston (1955),²¹ and then the recall of Huddleston to England which

¹⁵ "South African Religious Racism".

¹⁶ "The South African Tragedy".

¹⁷ In Afrikaans, *Die Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK)*. Because Niebuhr used the English translation in his writings on South Africa, we shall do likewise to avoid misunderstanding.

¹⁸ "The South African Tragedy".

¹⁹ There is no hint in the article itself, although Niebuhr does refer to a "minister of a Dutch Reformed Church in Johannesburg". For references to Marais' criticism of Apartheid at about this time see De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*. (Cape Town: David Philip, 2nd Ed. 1986), pp.58f.

²⁰ "Editorial Notes".

²¹ "The South African Tragedy".

Niebuhr characterized as "too bad" (in his review of *Naught for Your Comfort*).²²

In the latter half of the 1950's Niebuhr continues to reflect on key issues. He deals at length with the so-called "Church Clause" (29,c) of the Native Laws Amendment Bill of 1957 and the response of the churches to it,²³ and then in May 1960 he reflects upon "the rising tide of tension between the Negro population of South Africa and the Government"²⁴ which we know as the Defiance Campaign and the Pass-law protests which exploded in the Sharpeville massacre (March 21, 1960). He notes also the escape from arrest by the Archbishop of Johannesburg, Ambrose Reeves, and two-weeks later reflects upon the state of emergency, the massive state clamp-down upon and banning of black organizations and leaders, and the arrest and detention of "over a thousand Negro leaders" including Prof. Z.K. Matthews.²⁵ In this same article, Niebuhr indicates he is keeping abreast of South African church affairs in that he comments upon the document, "The Problem of Race Relations" produced by the Committee on Race Relations of the DRC.

With these two articles in May 1960, unfortunately, Niebuhr's commentary upon South Africa comes to an end. This should come as no surprise, however, as it was in the very same month that Reinhold Niebuhr completed his 32 years at Union Theological Seminary and moved out of the seminary complex (though he still lived in New York City for a while).²⁶ If we assume that much of Niebuhr's information on South Africa came via the Seminary, the offices of the National Council of Churches (across the road from the seminary) and the editorial offices

²² "A Thorn in the Flesh".

²³ See De Gruchy, *op. cit.*, pp.60ff.

²⁴ "The Church and the South African Tragedy".

²⁵ Whom he notes as a former contributor to *Christianity and Crisis*. "The Cold Comfort of a 'Mystic Unity'".

²⁶ Richard Fox, *op. cit.*, pp.270f.

of *Christianity and Crisis*, then the reason for the end to his commentary is clear.

While the halt to his reflections is therefore not a surprising thing, it is nevertheless a sad thing as Niebuhr would no doubt have offered fascinating comment upon the Cottesloe Consultation in Johannesburg held only six months later from December 7 to 14, 1960,²⁷ upon the ministry of one of South Africa's great prophets, Dr. Beyers Naude and the Christian Institute which he founded after the DRC rejected the resolutions of the Cottesloe conference,²⁸ upon the *Message to the People of South Africa* in which for the first time apartheid was declared a false-gospel,²⁹ upon the beginnings of the rise of a prophetic Christian conscience in the South African Council of Churches,³⁰ and possibly upon the furore surrounding the World Council of Churches' (WCC) Programme to Combat Racism.³¹ But we can only guess at what his sharp pen would have written.³²

3. The "Tragedy" of Apartheid.

Niebuhr's commitment to justice meant that he was categorically and unequivocally opposed to the policy of Apartheid. He characterized it as "reminiscent of the Nazi treatment of the Jews",³³ with blacks being held "in a status as close to slavery as anything known in modern

²⁷ See De Gruchy, *op. cit.*, pp.65ff.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.103ff.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.115ff.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.122ff.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp.127ff.

³² By a strange twist of irony, John de Gruchy, author of *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, was the student-pastor in the summer of 1963 of the First Congregational Church in Stockbridge where Niebuhr was a member. De Gruchy remembers a number of highly stimulating conversations with Niebuhr and recalls that even at this stage Niebuhr maintained a good grasp of the South African situation.

³³ "The South African Tragedy".

life"³⁴ - a system in which the "white minority [...] daily oppresses them and violates their human dignity by every method of chicane".³⁵

Niebuhr writes:

... once a community embarks upon the policy of making distinctions between human beings and of annulling the rights of some because of a difference in race or some other contingency, it is on a slippery slope which leads to disaster. The disaster results from some inhuman cruelty which ostensibly denies the common humanity of the victims of injustice but actually destroys the humanity of the perpetrators of injustice.³⁶

The "Dutch" in South Africa have thus "developed ethnic prejudice and solidarity to the last degree of consistency and inhumanity".³⁷

In his evaluation of apartheid Niebuhr interestingly dwells on the theme of "tragedy". Three of his articles have the word, "tragedy" in their titles,³⁸ and along with other articles they refer to "the tragedy" of and a "tragic situation" in South Africa.³⁹ Tragedy, like pathos and irony, is a theme that Niebuhr often uses. In his preface to the *Irony of American History* he defines it thus:

The tragic element in a human situation is constituted of conscious choices of evil for the sake of good. If men or nations do evil in a good cause; if they cover themselves with guilt in order to fulfill some high responsibility; or if they sacrifice some high value for the sake of a higher or equal one they make a tragic choice. ... Tragedy elicits admiration as well as pity because it combines nobility with guilt.⁴⁰

It must immediately be recognized that Niebuhr uses the word "tragedy" in a different sense when talking about the South African situation. Apartheid is tragic not because people "do evil in a good

³⁴ "The Church and the South African Tragedy".

³⁵ "The Cold Comfort of a 'Mystic Unity'".

³⁶ "The South African Tragedy",

³⁷ *The Structure of Nations and Empires*. *Op. cit.*, p.214.

³⁸ "The South African Tragedy"; "Tragedy in South Africa"; and "The Church and the South African Tragedy".

³⁹ "South African Religious Racism"; "Dutch Calvinism in South Africa"; "A Thorn in the Flesh"; and "Church and State in South Africa".

⁴⁰ *The Irony of American History*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), p.vii.

cause", and it certainly does not "elicit admiration" because of any "nobility" in it.

Rather, the South African situation is tragic because it *lacks* hope. Time and again Niebuhr returns to this theme in his articles on South Africa. He writes in 1955 that black South Africans "are in the most hopeless situation of any people in the world."⁴¹ In reviewing *Naught for Your Comfort* he notes that "the difference between America and South Africa is that there is hope here, and there seems none in South Africa".⁴² Thus for Niebuhr the absence of hope is the sign of injustice and the root of the South African "tragedy":

... justice means essentially that the hope of the future be not cut off. When that hope is destroyed, every present injustice becomes insufferable to the victims and destroys the humanity of the perpetrators....⁴³

That the system of apartheid destroys hope then is the grounds of its wickedness, and of the South African tragedy. Niebuhr can thus say elsewhere, "that the sin of South Africa was in closing the doors of hope".⁴⁴

Niebuhr's perception of the tragedy and lack of hope in South Africa led him to make apocalyptic-like predictions of doom for South Africa. In 1952 he comments that "the South African situation marches toward what seems now an inevitable catastrophic climax".⁴⁵ In 1955 he again echoes those words: "The tragic drama in South Africa seems to be moving toward a climax".⁴⁶ But five years later this particular concern is now expressed by a third party. He writes in 1960, after Sharpeville,

41 "Editorial Notes".

42 "A Thorn in the Flesh".

43 "The South African Tragedy".

44 "The Supreme Court on Segregation in the Schools", *op. cit.*, p.152.

45 "Dutch Calvinism in South Africa".

46 "The South African Tragedy".

... some have predicted that the tragic drama will move to a climax of catastrophe...⁴⁷

That the apocalypse did not come⁴⁸ provokes an interesting question about Niebuhr's analysis of South Africa, but we are in no position to pursue that further.

4. The Theology of Apartheid.

We have seen that Niebuhr is highly critical of Apartheid for the inhumanity and lack of hope it creates. His criticism goes deeper than just a "social" critique, however, for he focuses a good deal on a critique of the theology of apartheid. And this for him is another side to the "tragedy" of South Africa.

Throughout his articles Niebuhr constantly draws a neat line from the Dutch Reformed Church to the Nationalist Party. The South African government, he writes, "is, in effect, a "Christian" government; or more precisely, it is the Dutch Reformed Church in its political activity."⁴⁹

Niebuhr is not unmindful of the implications this has for the Christian faith:

As Christians we must have a particularly uneasy conscience about the monstrous situation which is developing in South Africa. For this great injustice has developed under the aegis of the Christian faith and avails itself of religious rationalizations of its racial prejudices.⁵⁰

Time and again he comments that the South African situation provides a lesson that "the Christian faith can be used as an instrument of evil".⁵¹ In his last article on South Africa in May 1960, Niebuhr comments upon a document of the DRC, "The Problem of Race Relations"

⁴⁷ "The Church and the South African Tragedy".

⁴⁸ Unless, of course, one re-interprets this to mean the uprising in 1976 and the broad internal defiance of the 1980's.

⁴⁹ "Tragedy in South Africa". See also "South African Religious Racism", and "The Church and the South African Tragedy".

⁵⁰ "Editorial Notes".

⁵¹ "Dutch Calvinism in South Africa".

which he labels "amazing and depressing". "There is not a word in it about the problem of justice and not an expression of an uneasy conscience... We have never witnessed such flagrant misuse of religious and theological terms to hide rather than illumine moral dilemmas.... Religious self-deception cannot go further. This is the final limit."⁵²

For Niebuhr the South African situation thus becomes a strikingly clear example of his understanding of sin: That we sin more grievously in the spirit than in the flesh, and that religion *per se* is no help to the practice of justice. He writes:

What is important is the religious foundation of the racist policy of the Malan government. This is important, for it proves that a "religious" attitude is not of itself virtuous. The greatest injustices, the sharpest class distinctions, and the worst cruelties are always those which have a religious sanction. The religious level of experience is the arena of the final encounter between man and God. In that encounter either man, whether individual or collective, is convicted of the pride and pretension to which all human life is prone, and is "crucified with Christ" in order that he may truly live; or he seeks to identify his life, his interest, and his ideals with the divine order to protect them and justify them against criticisms and competitive threats..... It is one of the mysteries of evil in history how means of grace can be corrupted to become means of sin.⁵³

And again elsewhere:

The South African situation teaches us that it c makes no difference whether these inhumanities are conceived and practiced by explicit pagans or whether they are generated by the pious Calvinistic farmers of South Africa by compounding Christian piety with racial arrogance and fear. *The fact that such a piety could generate such cruelty ought to make all Christians more circumspect in attributing all evils to "secularism".* South Africa is merely another reminder of a fact, which we should have known from history, namely, that *the Christian faith has been, and will continue to become the vehicle of every corruption.* "Therefore let any one who thinks that he stand take heed lest he fall".⁵⁴

Niebuhr's understanding of sin and grace is neatly illustrated in these comments.

⁵² "The Cold Comfort of a 'Mystic Unity'".

⁵³ "South African Religious Racism". Emphasis mine.

⁵⁴ "The South African Tragedy" Emphasis mine.

5. The South African Church Scene.

Being overwhelmingly critical of apartheid and its theological justification Niebuhr yet displays remarkable perception into some of the nuances of the South African church scene. His strength is that he is not led to employ simplistic categories for analysis.

First, he is clear that the DRC is not a monolithic body. He is aware of and comments upon the criticisms of apartheid from within the DRC. He notes the criticisms of "a minister of a leading Dutch Reformed Church of Johannesburg"⁵⁵ of the broederbond's involvement in the Malan election victory of 1948. He also records the dissension within the DRC towards the "Church Clause" of 1957 adding that "knowledgeable observers believe that any leaven in the Dutch community is worth twice any measure of leaven among the English-speaking people".⁵⁶ Again in 1960 he makes reference to "an increasing dissent from some sensitive spirits within the church".⁵⁷

Niebuhr is also aware of the tensions between the DRC and the "English-speaking Churches" on the issue of apartheid.⁵⁸ He is well aware that these churches have universally condemned apartheid,⁵⁹ and he refers specifically to the opposition to the "Church Clause" of 1957.⁶⁰ Niebuhr is also well acquainted with the outspoken anti-apartheid sentiments of various Christian individuals such as Father Trevor Huddleston,⁶¹ Alan Paton, Bishop Ambrose Reeves, Archbishop Joost de Blank,⁶² and Prof. Z.K. Matthews.⁶³

⁵⁵ "South African Religious Racism".

⁵⁶ "Church and State in South Africa" and "Tragedy in South Africa".

⁵⁷ "The Church and the South African Tragedy".

⁵⁸ Elsewhere Niebuhr indicates that he is well aware of the tensions between the "Dutch" and English settlers in South Africa. See *The Structure of Nations and Empires*. pp.156,173,214.

⁵⁹ "The Church and the South African Tragedy".

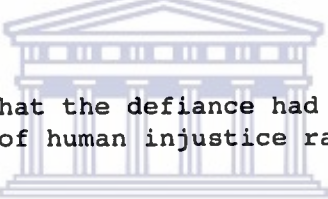
⁶⁰ "Tragedy in South Africa".

⁶¹ Mentioned in "The South African Tragedy" and "A Thorn in the Flesh".

⁶² These three mentioned in "The Church and the South African Tragedy".

⁶³ Mentioned in "Cold Comfort of a 'Mystic Unity'".

But just as Niebuhr recognizes the tensions within the DRC, he is well aware of the tension within the English-speaking Churches between words and deeds. He notes with approval that Trevor Huddleston "thinks that the English speaking Churches are too content with official pronouncements. They do not do anything to proclaim their solidarity with the Negro victims of injustice",⁶⁴ commenting later that while the English speaking Churches have condemned apartheid, it "has obscured its witness by not objecting to more than the obviously inhumane aspects of segregation".⁶⁵ Nowhere is this clearer than in his analysis of the English-speaking Churches response to the "Church Clause" of 1957. While appreciating their willingness to defy the law, Niebuhr feels that the church was wrong to protest only once the government threatened the church:



 One could wish that the defiance had come earlier, when the problem was one of human injustice rather than the sanctity of the church.⁶⁶

Here one can hear shades of his critique of Karl Barth and the Confessing Church in Germany who also seemed to be more interested in saving the integrity of the church than in saving the lives of the Jews. We need to note here that Niebuhr was in many respects pre-dating a critique that would emerge from South African theologians only in the late 1980's.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ "A Thorn in the Flesh".

⁶⁵ "The Church and the South African Tragedy".

⁶⁶ "Tragedy in South Africa".

⁶⁷ See for example J. Cochrane, *Servants of Power*, (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987); and C. Villa-Vicencio, *Trapped in Apartheid*. (Cape Town: David Philip, 1988).

6. Pressure on South Africa.

We have seen Niebuhr's sensitivity to the church situation in South Africa, as well as his condemnation of Apartheid. We need now to examine how he felt the nations of the world, and the world church should respond to this evil tragedy.

Because Niebuhr believed that apartheid had been born from within the bosom of the church and was promoted as a "Christian" policy, he felt that "as Christians we must have a particularly uneasy conscience about the monstrous situation which is developing in South Africa". In his first article on South Africa in 1952 he argued that the world church had to do something to express its opposition to apartheid lest the gospel and the church of Jesus Christ be compromised:

Perhaps this is a case in which the World Council [of Churches] must find ways for unequivocally condemning the anti-Christian conduct of a Christian church, analogous to the Roman church's discipline. Otherwise the whole church must bear the onus of this sin.⁶⁸

Three years later, in 1955 Niebuhr saw that the idea of "discipline" was not feasible, but he still felt that a clear statement of opposition was needed:

Even a united Protestantism cannot discipline a member church for violation of Christian standards however flagrant those violations may be. But ought there not be more concerted Christian protests, directed to the Dutch church in South Africa? There have been *sub rosa* delegations, but since these did not prove effective it would seem to be in order to inform the South African church that its conduct outrages the conscience of Christendom.⁶⁹

Niebuhr was not the only one calling for pressure from the world church. By 1960, in the wake of the Sharpeville massacre, voices within the country began to call for the expulsion of the DRC from the WCC. Anglican Archbishop Joost de Blank wrote a letter calling for such

⁶⁸ "South African Religious Racism".

⁶⁹ "Editorial Notes".

action, but it was turned down by the WCC.⁷⁰ Reflecting on this turn of events in the country and in the church, Niebuhr writes in May 1960 as follows:

The Archbishop of Cape Town, Joost de Blank has called upon the World Council of Churches to expel the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa for its complicity with the Government's inhumanity.

It may be that the World Council does not have the authority to do this. But it had better do something drastic to express the conscience of its world-wide community. Surely it ought to be able to take action as rigorous as the unanimous decision of the House of Commons in condemning the South African policy. Otherwise the observing world will draw the conclusion that the church is impotent when concerned with the "weightier matters of the law," which is to say the law of love.⁷¹

Niebuhr's favourable attitude towards the House of Commons' resolution just mentioned illustrates another way in which he felt pressure could be put upon not just the church, but upon the South African government itself. By 1960 he thus speaks favourably about international pressure to boycott and isolate South Africa:

We have some hopes that the rising tide of world protest - the United Nations resolution, the unanimous condemnation passed by the British House of Commons, the private protests of indignant people, the boycott of South Africa by British musicians and sportsmen - will somehow stay the hand of the hysterical Government before it plunges into inevitable disaster.⁷²

Niebuhr also began to see another way in which protest could and needed to be made. As early as 1955 he was beginning to question the economic support given to the South African government by United States industry. Although this is by no means a clear and developed call for sanctions it does identify the two issues which became important in the 1980's disinvestment campaigns, viz. economic bolstering of the apartheid economy, and the moral implications of South African ties for U.S. citizens:

⁷⁰ For more analysis of the event see De Gruchy, *op. cit.*, pp.63ff.

⁷¹ "The Church and the South African Tragedy".

⁷² "The Church and the South African Tragedy".

Meanwhile the sale of gold and uranium by South Africa to our own nation gives the economy enough expansive health to postpone the rebellion into an unforeseeable future. Thus our own nations is implicated in the evils which most American citizens abhor.⁷³

7. Comparison between South Africa and the United States of America.

Being such a keen critic of United States social life Niebuhr was bound to make comparisons between the two nations. This was not the first nor the last time comparisons would be drawn between these two ex-British colonies.⁷⁴ While Niebuhr clearly feels that the United States is in a morally stronger position on the issue of racism, he does see some parallels.

He sees an analogy, for example, between the relationship of the English-speaking Churches to the DRC over black rights in South Africa and the relationship of the northern "Yankee" Christians to those in the Deep South of the U.S.A. over "Negro" rights.⁷⁵

But at deeper level, he sees parallels between the racism in both countries so that condemnation of apartheid is no cause for self-righteousness and arrogance. "But who are we to criticize?" he asks. "Our churches have been segregated for generations, not by law, but by custom."⁷⁶ Elsewhere Niebuhr also cautions that the America churches be wary of the same racism as in South Africa. But, by and large, while seeing some similarities, and helping United States Christians to learn from the South African tragedy, Niebuhr does see a difference between the two countries:

⁷³ "Editorial notes".

⁷⁴ One of the most interesting is a book by the brother of the present State President of South Africa, W.A. De Klerk, *The Puritans in Africa*, (Hammondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1976). He quotes Niebuhr (at length in one instance), as well as having a chapter titled, "The Irony of Afrikaner History".

⁷⁵ "Tragedy in South Africa".

⁷⁶ "Tragedy in South Africa".

While we in America do not have as desperate a situation as South Africa, it is nevertheless apparent that our standards of justice are more defective in the realm of race relations than in the realm of economic relations.⁷⁷

In the end it is this focus on "desperateness" which seems to be the key difference for Niebuhr. We have noted how Niebuhr saw that the crushing of hope was the key "sin" of Apartheid. It is on this fundamental issue that he sees a division between the two societies:

Despite our desegregation problems, the difference between America and South Africa is that there is hope here, and there seems none in South Africa.⁷⁸

In an article reflecting on the U.S. Supreme Court decision to overturn the doctrine of "separate but equal" in education, Niebuhr deals specifically with the relationship between the U.S. and South Africa. Stung into defence of the U.S. by the criticisms of racial segregation in America by a visiting DRC minister, Niebuhr accepts the charge of segregation, but insists upon a crucial and significant difference:

We told him that our society undoubtedly had an unsolved race issue. But we had many citizens in the white group who had dedicated themselves to the cause of justice and many Negroes who hoped for the future, and allowed their hopes to console them about present bitter realities. We did not pretend that our community was free of race prejudice, but we asserted that the difference was in the way a society was closed or kept open for future possibilities. The Supreme Court decisions has justified every argument used in the encounter. We hope our South African will hear of this decision and learn from it.⁷⁹

Now is not the time to debate with Niebuhr about his perceptions of the lack of hope in South Africa and the "openness" of U.S. society in the light of the years that followed this statement, especially in view of our critique of his perceptions of justice in the U.S. Here we need

77 "Dutch Calvinism in South Africa".

78 "A Thorn in the Flesh".

79 "The Supreme Court on Segregation in the Schools", in *Love and Justice*, p.156.

just note that for Niebuhr, *this* was the issue that he felt divided the two countries on the issue of racism.

Here we draw our case study to a close. While it clearly does not illustrate the full width and breadth of Niebuhr's thought, it does give us an interesting insight into his theological and ethical concerns as well as meeting our three aims expressed at the beginning of the excursus.



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