

He must act out with his body what he thinks out with his brain.³⁴⁵

The task which Fromm envisions here is to abolish the concept of education as a process of training people to adjust to the social machine and to enable it to become an instrument of the productive orientation. This goal can be achieved by the following measure: "doing away with the harmful separation between theoretical and practical knowledge."³⁴⁶ This would immediately necessitate a radical transformation of public education and the establishment of adult education for everyone who seeks it. On the former, Fromm suggests that some sort of handicraft will be essential in addition to theoretical knowledge of the fundamental technical processes of industry. This combination of practical and theoretical knowledge will equip students for the humanization of their technological society.

No youngster should graduate from school unless he has learned some kind of handicraft in a satisfactory and meaningful manner; no primary education would be considered finished before the student has a grasp of the fundamental technical process of our industry. Certainly high school ought to combine practical work of a handicraft and of modern industrial technique with theoretical instruction.³⁴⁷

³⁴⁵SS, p. 346.

³⁴⁶Ibid., p. 345.

³⁴⁷Ibid.

Adult education, on the other hand, means "the education of all adults of every age."³⁴⁸ The fruitfulness of such a venture is assured.

For many people the age of thirty or forty is much more appropriate for learning--in the sense of understanding rather than of memorizing--than school or college age, and in many instances the general interest is also greater at later age than at the stormy period of youth.³⁴⁹

What Fromm is really interested in with regard to public education is the perfect synthesis of theoretical and practical knowledge. Put in his own words, public education must enable us "to respond to the world with our senses in a meaningful, skilled, productive, active, sharing way."³⁵⁰ The best means by which one can accomplish it is ritual, or "collective art,"³⁵¹ because true sharing can be done only collectively.

"Collective art," is shared; it permits man to feel one with others in a meaningful, rich, productive way. It is not an individual "leisure time" occupation, added to life, it is an integral part of life.³⁵²

The appreciation of good music and literature, participation in community singings, common dances, choirs, plays,

³⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 346.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 347.

³⁵¹ Ibid. Fromm is reluctant to use the word "ritual" because of its superficial connotations.

³⁵² Ibid., p. 348.

bands, learning to play musical instruments or to paint or to arrange flowers, etc. will all contribute to the enrichment of the productive orientation.³⁵³ In his latest book, Fromm develops the concept of ritual by making further concrete suggestions.

It can even be hoped that certain forms of rituals become widely and meaningfully accepted. We see the beginnings of this, for instance, in songs like "We Shall Overcome," which are living rituals, not just songs. A ritual like that of common silence as it has been practiced by Friends as the center of their religious service could become acceptable to large groups of people.³⁵⁴

The psychospiritual transformation of human society must be carried out in the realm of religion as well. Here it will be sufficient for us to point out again Fromm's view of the essence of religion as being the affirmation of the dignity of man, love and reason. Fromm, consequently, argues that man must find a common faith in the humanity of man and not in any "affirmative statements about God,"³⁵⁵ in order to fight the idolatries of the state, power, machine and success.

. . . it is not too far-fetched to believe that a new religion will develop within the next few hundred years, a religion which corresponds to the development of the human race; the most important feature of such a religion would be its

³⁵³Modern sports, however, occupy only a subordinate role (see SS, p. 350).

³⁵⁴RH, p. 145.

³⁵⁵SS, p. 352.

universalistic character, corresponding to the unification of mankind which is taking place in this epoch; it would embrace the humanistic teachings common to all great religions of the East and of the West; its doctrines would not contradict the rational insight of mankind today, and its emphasis would be on the practice of life, rather than on doctrinal beliefs.³⁵⁶

c) Political transformation

For Fromm the objective of political transformation is the establishment of a democratic society. The democratic society is a society in which all instruments of coercion are kept at the minimum and in which a free association of all citizens bound together by their common interests and their sense of brotherhood is assured. In sum, the principles of the democratic society are liberty, equality, and fraternity.³⁵⁷ And Fromm is confident that the establishment of such a society is a "real possibility" in this generation.³⁵⁸

Fromm then goes on to discuss the conditions which form a real possibility to achieve this end. They are basically three. The first condition has to do with the psychological attitude of people against the hapless status quo of their society and their deep longing for new and dynamic

³⁵⁶Ibid., p. 352.

³⁵⁷Ibid., p. 276.

³⁵⁸RH, p. 151.

directions.³⁵⁹ The second condition for the establishment of the truly democratic society is the willingness of people to transform, and not to destroy, the present social system.³⁶⁰ The third condition is the preservation of the essence of democratic structure which can be divided into three elements: the right of the citizen to make sound decisions, his right to objective information, and the right of his decisions to be influential in the decision-making process of his society.

With regard to the citizen's right to make sound decisions, Fromm suggests informed discussion within small groups because sound decisions cannot be made in the atmosphere of mass voting. They must be made in the atmosphere of dialogue.

³⁵⁹Ibid., p. 151. A good illustration is provided by the effectiveness and dynamism of the McCarthy campaign during the Presidential election year of 1968 (Ibid.).

³⁶⁰Fromm definitely rejects "a violent revolution in the style of the French or Russian revolutions, which means the overthrow of the government by force and the seizure of power by the revolutionary leaders" (Ibid., p. 148). The reasons for the unfeasibility of such a solution are easy to find. First, "there is no mass base for such a revolution." (Ibid.) The young radicals and the Negro militants constitute only a very small minority to make their movement anyway effective. Second, the desperate attempt of guerrilla war advocated by some radicals will be absolutely inefficient in our highly complex society "based on a large group of skilled managers and managerial bureaucracy" (Ibid.). Third, neither the students nor the blacks are qualified to take the place of those who run the industrial machine now (Ibid., pp. 149-150).

It is essential for the possibility of a dialogue that each member of the group not only try to be less defensive and more open, but also that he try to understand what the other person means to say rather than the actual formulation he gives to his thought.³⁶¹

For this purpose the establishment of such small gatherings as "face-to-face groups" is essential. Thus, Fromm goes on to state:

. . . the number of participating people must be restricted in such a way that the discussion remains direct and does not allow the rhetoric or the manipulating influence of demagogues to become effective. If people meet regularly and know each other, they begin to feel whom they can trust and whom they cannot, who is constructive and who is not, and in the process of their own participation, their own sense of responsibility and self-confidence grows.³⁶²

Sound decisions also must be based on sound information. Therefore, a way must be found to supply the citizen with full and objective information on all the questions which come before him for decision.

. . . objective and relevant information which is the basis for everyone's having an approximately clear and accurate picture of the basic issues must be given to each group.³⁶³

In this context, Fromm rejects the idea that the data have become so difficult and complex that only highly specialized experts can tackle them. Despite the highly complex

³⁶¹ Ibid., p. 115.

³⁶² Ibid., p. 112.

³⁶³ Ibid., p. 113.

nature of the data one must examine, it is still true that the basic and minimum amount of data for sound decisions is still available to man even on such delicate fields as foreign policy and national and foreign economics through reliable newspapers like The New York Times and his own rational judgment.

I submit that the basic facts are accessible to anyone who keeps himself informed by reading all the available news. (It is true that only a few newspapers, like The New York Times, give all the necessary information, and even those sometimes with a biased selection; but that could be remedied and does not touch the essential issue.) On the basis of the facts, the informed, thoughtful, and critical citizen is capable of getting the basic information which he needs to form a picture of the fundamental issues.

Most of the information one needs in order to understand the intentions of other countries can be gained by a thorough and rational analysis of their structure and their record, provided that the analysts are not biased by their own emotions.³⁶⁴

Fromm argues that sound decision based upon objective information must be aimed at the most important element of the democratic process of human society: the citizen's right to be influential in the decision-making process of his own society. Here is the crux of the matter, because without making this effective, the previous two elements of the democratic society will lose their whole meaning. Therefore, Fromm writes:

³⁶⁴Ibid., p. 113-114.



. . . whatever he, as a member of such a small and face-to-face group, decides must have a direct influence on the decision making exercised by a centrally elected parliamentary executive. If this were not so, the citizen would remain as politically stupid as he is today.³⁶⁵

Thus far, we have seen the nature of political transformation and the three conditions for its achievement.

Fromm's view of political transformation, however, does not stop here. He goes on to make some definite and concrete plans through which those three conditions can be satisfactorily fulfilled. The basic presupposition of his concrete plans is this: they must be caused by a movement of people

. . . which is not bureaucratic, not connected with the political machines, and which is the result of active and imaginative efforts by those who share the same aims.³⁶⁶

And such a movement toward the establishment of the truly democratic society must take several concrete steps to make it effective. Here again Fromm is bold enough to suggest some of them.

The first step which Fromm suggests is the formation of a council called the "Voice of American Conscience" on both national and local levels. On the national level, a group of about fifty men and women, whose moral integrity and intellectual capability are well known to the public,

³⁶⁵SS, p. 341.

³⁶⁶RH, p. 157.



will be formed to deal with the foreign and domestic policies of the country. The objective of this group is simply this:

They would deliberate and issue statements which, because of the weight of those who issued them, would be newsworthy, and because of the truth and rationality of their contents would win attention from at least a large sector of the American public.³⁶⁷

On the local level, councils would deal with the specific and practical questions relevant for the city or state which they represent.³⁶⁸

Though the "Voice of American Conscience" is divided into national and local levels, its functions are the same. They are the following four: (1) "to clarify the issues," (2) "to show the real possibilities and alternatives," (3) "to recommend solutions," and finally (4) "to respond to statements and actions by other important social bodies, and to any criticism of their own recommendations."³⁶⁹

How should the members of the council be chosen? For Fromm, neither free election nor arbitrary appointment will do. Again Fromm offers some concrete solutions of his own.

³⁶⁷Ibid., p. 157. For example, "the National Council would debate the question of the Vietnam war, our foreign policy in Asia, our assistance to the development of the poor nations, the reconstruction of our cities, the problems of values, education, and culture" (Ibid., p. 158).

³⁶⁸Ibid. The local councils would debate problems of "conservation, city planning, slum clearance, relocating industries, etc" (Ibid.).

³⁶⁹RH, p. 158.



A group of about ten people would agree on the names of forty or fifty persons to be invited to suggest whom they might like to recommend.

As a result of this procedure, one might get a National Council which would not satisfy everybody and yet which would be fundamentally representative of the American conscience. The method of forming this Council is nonbureaucratic, personalistic, concrete, and for this very reason, more effective than the traditional methods. The regional and local Councils could be formed in the same way, possibly aided by suggestions from the members of the National Council.³⁷⁰

Fromm is quite confident that those councils on both the national and local levels will be quite effective due to the impressive credentials of the members and the rationality of their argument, as well as to the public which is, through education, becoming increasingly perceptive to a well-reasoned and cogent argument.

Those who represent culture have no direct power; but since the progress of society depends on their contribution, their voice will be taken seriously by a new class of people with college educations (teachers, technicians, programers, laboratorians, research workers, professionals, etc.) whose cooperation is a vital necessity for the functioning of the social system.

.....

It is not too farfetched to think that the moral and intellectual weight of such groups could be of considerable influence on the thinking of Americans, and by the freshness of its approach attract a great deal of attention.³⁷¹

³⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 160.

³⁷¹ Ibid., p. 159.

Needless to say, in these councils the need of the individual for full participation is not perfectly satisfied. For the need of the individual to work actively with others, Fromm suggests the formation of two additional kinds of social groups: the "Club" and the "Group." The former will be a group of 100 to 300 members which meets once a week to engage in some relevant practical work in which the individual can participate. For instance,

. . . participation in political campaigns, organization of discussion groups among neighbors and friends, engaging political leaders in public debates, problem-oriented care of public functions and community property, care of people--the old, children, and people in trouble, in the spirit of concern and stimulation rather than of bureaucratic methods.³⁷²

The organization of the "Club" must be free and non-bureaucratic. Each "Club" should retain full autonomy, though it must seek constantly to be related to other "Clubs." But beyond this, Fromm is quite specific about its organization.

Each should have a chairman and a secretary, and these offices should change among the members every year. It would seem to be useful if once every six months or every year the representatives of the Clubs--say, one for each Club--could meet regionally and nationally in order to exchange experiences and to demonstrate to the rest of the population the value and fruitfulness of this type of organization.³⁷³

³⁷²Ibid., p. 161.

³⁷³Ibid., p. 162.



Thus, the purpose of the "Club" goes far beyond playing the role of another political party. It seeks the transformation of man himself rather than the influence of specific political actions; in short, its aim is:

. . . to create a new attitude, to transform people, to demonstrate new ideas as they appeared in the flesh, as it were, of many groups of people, and thus to influence other people more effectively than is possible by political concepts.³⁷⁴

However, the "Club" has its own limitations. Due to its size and the diverse nature of its membership, the "Club" fails to offer opportunities for the small number of the most radically committed. For them the "Group" must be established. It is a group of people who share a love for humanity and is totally committed to furthering its manifestations in human relations and politics. The objective of the "Group" then is the development of a new style of life.

These Groups would differ from the Clubs in the sense that each member would be willing to make greater sacrifices, and also to transform his personal life more profoundly in terms of the general principles of the movement. They should become a real home for every participant, a home where he finds nourishment in the sense of knowledge and of interpersonal sharing and, at the same time, where he has a chance to give. Their aim would be to move toward a personal transformation from an alienated person into one of active participation.³⁷⁵

³⁷⁴Ibid., p. 163.

³⁷⁵Ibid., p. 165.

As to its organization, the size must be small enough to allow genuine interpersonal relationships. Beyond this, each "Group" should be autonomous, though, at the same time, it needs to be related to other "Groups" for information and assistance. Furthermore, the "Group" must be composed of people of different age levels, education, social class, and race.³⁷⁶ It is also essential that each "Group" be free from any particular formulations of concepts and doctrines which members are required to accept in order to participate. "What matters is the practice of life, the total attitude, the goal, and not a specific conceptualization."³⁷⁷

Fromm thus contends that the whole movement of the "Voice of the American Conscience," the "Clubs," and the "Groups" would allow the individual to find ways for immediate action and participation in the transformation of society. Such a movement, however, must be established in the near future in order for it to function effectively.

³⁷⁶Ibid., p. 167.

³⁷⁷Ibid. All this, however, does not mean that members should not discuss concrete issues or particular concepts. Eventually disagreement will occur and debate will continue. But there should be no disagreement on the attitude of the members who are engaged in debate: love for humanity. Fromm therefore writes, "I could imagine one Group which was in favor of civil disobedience and another which did not favor civil disobedience. Each individual would have a chance to join that particular Group whose attitude was most congenial to his own and yet be part of a large movement which could even permit itself to have diversity as considerable as that between civil disobedience and its opposite" (Ibid., pp. 167-168).



Time is running out. "We are in the very midst of the crisis of modern man. We do not have too much time left. If we do not begin now, it will probably be too late."³⁷⁸

Thus, when Fromm proposes his cure for the sickness, there is no doubt in his mind that its complete cure is possible. The question, however, is whether his intention is really supported by the basic principle upon which his whole anthropology is based. Here we must repeat what we have said already. In his proposed cure, he regards man solely as a product of society and thus fails to maintain consistently the paradoxical tension between man and society and also fails to apply it to the bases and content of his proposed cure. Let us clarify this thesis.

According to Fromm, society definitely influences the conscious life of man. Language, logic, and the social character all play the role of filter so that experience cannot enter awareness unless it can penetrate them. Here Fromm describes the functions of society without relating them to man as the initiator of his actions. Fromm fails to clarify what roles man ought to play in order to transform and develop language, logic, and the social character which are conducive to his productive growth. Man is obviously not just a product of society. He is a responsible

³⁷⁸Ibid., p. 168.



being. As we have said repeatedly, Fromm does maintain this view also. In order to do justice to man's responsibility in this world, Fromm, in his discussion of the bases for the cure, brings out a concept of freedom as the power of contrary choice which has been presupposed throughout his work but never explicitly delineated before. Man is still capable of choosing a solution on the basis of reason. He can choose productiveness over against regression if he wants to badly enough. Fromm's emphasis is exclusively upon man as the initiator at the expense of man as a product of society. Therefore, our question is a valid one: "What impact do the three filters of society and man's power of contrary choice make upon each other?"

This ambiguous character of Fromm's position is also evident in his blueprint for the good society. In his discussion of economic transformation, Fromm attempts to do justice to the paradoxical relation between man and society. Thus, he introduces the principle of co-management and co-determination in which the individual person and the company for which he works influence each other toward humanization. But when Fromm speaks of an annually guaranteed income, this relationship disappears. For he bases the validity of his program solely upon his dogmatic assumption that once man is liberated from worries over the material necessities of ordinary life, he will inevitably fulfill his inherent

potentialities productively. Man is defined as a product of society. In short, Fromm affirms both man as the initiator and man as a product at separate occasions. But nowhere does he show how they are actually related in the humanization of the economic system.

In his discussion of cultural transformation, Fromm says that, in order for man to become truly human, he must live in a society where education, ritual, and religion teach the highest value of humanity. Obviously, it is in each one of them that the dialectical relationship must take place concretely, since they involve most immediately the interaction between man and man as well as the development of the individual person's potentialities within himself. And yet, unfortunately, Fromm's treatment of education, ritual, and religion does not go beyond the level of simply describing what they are. Fromm does not probe the difficult question as to how the combination of theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge in public education, singing "We shall Overcome" and practicing occasional silent meditation, and the genuine affirmation of common humanity in religion, can revitalize the productive potentialities in an already regressed person. Nowhere does he spell out how the dynamic interaction between man and society are concretely related in those areas.



Nor does Fromm's discussion of political transformation dispel the basic ambiguity of his thought. Throughout his discussion, he presupposes the importance of man's ability to take the initiative. Man must be willing to reform the political structures of society. The Groups and the Clubs are means by which man achieves this basic objective. The difficulty of Fromm's discussion, however, is that he does not clarify how man as the actor is related to man as a social product in this transformation. If society is already suppressive, how can man, a product of society, bring about its change? If man is already regressive, how should society revitalize his creativity which is already lost? On each of these questions, his position is far from being clear.

It may be concluded, therefore, that Fromm's intention to affirm the curability of man's sickness is not really substantiated by the content of his discussion. What he has given is not a delineation of the cure for the sickness, but a description of the results of the cure. At the end, the reader is left wondering how his concrete program can be made effective in the midst of the complex human realities.



CHAPTER III

REINHOLD NIEBUHR'S DOCTRINE OF MAN

I. The major sources of Reinhold Niebuhr's doctrine of man

Reinhold Niebuhr's concern throughout his career as a Christian theologian has been to analyze and uncover the mystery of the nature and destiny of man. In his creative attempt to answer the question of the proper estimate of man, Niebuhr, more than any other American thinker in the last forty years, has helped to change the theological climate in America.¹ But our understanding of his doctrine of man will be incomplete without probing the major sources of his thought, for the man of creative spirit is always deeply imbedded in historical roots, although he does not accept any previous opinion or doctrine uncritically. In this section, we shall attempt to uncover how certain ideas and thinkers, both Christian and secular, have contributed to the formation of Niebuhr's doctrine of man.

A. The Bible

Since Niebuhr is a Christian theologian, it is obvious that the New Testament is the central source from which he draws his thought. The New Testament is important to him

¹John C. Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Contributions to Christian Social Ethics," Reinhold Niebuhr: A Prophetic Voice in our Time, Harold R. Landon, editor (Greenwich, Conn.: Seabury Press, 1962), p. 58.



particularly for two reasons. First, it presents the ethics of Jesus. Second, it presents the Pauline understanding of the grace of God. Since we shall deal with both aspects in detail later, a very brief statement will suffice for now.

Niebuhr underscores repeatedly throughout his writings that the basic norm of human life is the perfect love, agape, which is revealed in the life and death of Jesus Christ. It is the suffering love of the One who sought nothing for Himself. Niebuhr's ethics is concerned with one fundamental problem: how agape should be made effective in human life. Niebuhr readily acknowledges, in response to his liberal opponents, that agape is never fully embodied in any human motive or action. To think otherwise is to ignore the complexities and dynamics of human life. But this perfect love remains relevant as the highest norm for both motive and action. And it is made most effective when man tries to approximate such love in his particular situation.

The primary importance of the ethics of Jesus in Niebuhr's thought was already evident even in one of his earliest books. In Moral Man and Immoral Society, published in 1932, Niebuhr differentiates Christian ethics from a rational ethic and defines the principle of the former to be the insistence that "the needs of the neighbor shall be met,

without a careful computation of relative needs."² Niebuhr's concept of love has been a major target of many of his critics. But Niebuhr, who is always open to his critics, has not changed his mind about the nature and character of love in human life despite their constant attack.

In addition to the ethics of Jesus, the New Testament provides Niebuhr with the Pauline understanding of the grace of God. With Paul, he affirms repeatedly that man's life is fulfilled only by the gracious God of Jesus Christ. This point is further strengthened by another Pauline conviction that God accepts man, in spite of his default, by the saving grace mediated through Christ. This explains why Niebuhr has preached so many stirring sermons on the text, "Whether we live, we live unto the Lord; whether we die, we die unto the Lord; whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:8). It is this belief about the ultimate goodness of God which enables Niebuhr to act in a sinful world and to do the next best thing even though it involves participation in the sins of the world. Thus, Niebuhr's appropriation of the Pauline faith frees him from cynicism, on the one hand, and perfectionism, on the other, because the meaning of man's life is not found in what man can accomplish, but what God accomplishes for man.

²Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), p. 57. Hereafter MBIS.

The impact of the Old Testament, particularly that of the prophetic tradition, upon Niebuhr's thought is also quite obvious. Being sensitive to the acculturation of the Gospel by liberalism, he is insistent upon making qualitative distinction between God and man. God is "Wholly Other" in the sense that there is nothing in man that enables him to be God Himself. Niebuhr makes it clear throughout his writings that God's thoughts are not our thoughts; neither our ways His ways. It is only in this context that we can comprehend Niebuhr's doctrine of human sin. Sin is man's attempt to pretend to be his own god. It is this pretentiousness that is the cause of the sickness of man. One of the most vivid illustrations of sin in Niebuhr's thought is taken from the Old Testament. In his sermonic essay, "The Tower of Babel,"³ he sees the ultimate tragedy of all human history in its failure to understand its limitations. Every civilization in the past has been destroyed by new elements which created a new civilization, but the new civilization commits the same mistake--the forgetfulness of its own limitations. The central thrust of the Biblical story, according to Niebuhr, is that man always claims a finality which he cannot possess and that this sin "corrupts the highest as

³Reinhold Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), pp. 27-46. Hereafter BT.



well as the lowest achievements of life."⁴ "Man is mortal. That is his fate. Man pretends not to be mortal. That is his sin."⁵

In addition to the prophetic proclamation of the qualitative difference between God and man, the prophetic writings in the Old Testament have compelled Niebuhr to emphasize social justice as one essential element of Christian faith. It is his conviction that we must be concerned not only with man's spirit but also with the whole of life. Before God's call for justice, we are compelled to get out of our religious ghettos in order to combat racism, poverty, war, and all other dehumanizing forces in the world. The following words of Amos therefore most concisely describe the theme of Niebuhr's Christian social ethics.

Take away from me the noise of
your song;
to the melody of your harps I
will not listen.
But let justice roll down like
waters,
and righteousness like an ever-
flowing stream.

Amos 5:23-24.

But for Niebuhr it is also clear that the final consummation of the Kingdom of God will be brought about by God, not by man. God will be faithful to man in spite of

⁴Ibid., p. 29.

⁵Ibid., p. 28.



man's unfaithfulness to Him. History is an interim between God's promise and its fulfillment. This prophetic conviction explains the ultimate hopefulness of Niebuhr's thought. Man's hope lies in God's constant faithfulness to man, not in what he himself can achieve. As we shall see later, Niebuhr finds the basic theological shortcoming of the prophetic writings in their inability to reconcile clearly the concept of a loving God with the concept of a judging God. In his estimation, only the New Testament can show how these two essential aspects of God can be incorporated in a paradoxical tension in one God. But equally clear to Niebuhr is the prophetic assertion that it is God who is both sovereign and merciful who will finally overcome the sin of man. Man is simply incapable of self-salvation.

B. Liberalism

Niebuhr himself confesses that the first formative stage of his theology occurred when he began to question the validity of liberal theology. His reaction against the optimistic anthropology of liberal theologians in the early part of the twentieth century took its definite form during the years in Detroit (1915-1928). Detroit was the city of the vast automobile manufactory of Henry Ford which made blighting effects upon the human life of modern industrialism. The economic injustices which were inflicted upon the poor by the rich began to focalize for him the crisis of the person in an advanced technocratic civilization.

The automobile industry, particularly the Ford Motor Company, was just beginning its rapid expansion, which was to make Detroit the motor capital of the country. Detroit was to expand from a half to a million and a half population. The resulting facts determined my development more than any books which I may have read. For on the one hand, my congregation grew from a handful to eight hundred souls. . . . and it numbered in the flock everything from auto workers to two millionaires. On the other hand, the social realities of a rapidly expanding industrial community, before the time of the organization of the workers, and under the leadership of a group of resourceful engineers who understood little about human relations, forced me to reconsider the liberal and highly moralistic creed which I had accepted as tantamount to the Christian faith.⁶

It was the grim social realities in Detroit more than anything else which undermined his youthful optimism.⁷ To be more specific, Niebuhr had to fight "the moral pretensions of Henry Ford, whose five-dollar-a-day wage gave him a world-wide reputation for generosity,"⁸ on the one hand, and the total inability of the Church to deal with the powerful realities of the modern technological society, on the other.⁹ As a hard working parson in Detroit, Niebuhr himself knew

⁶Reinhold Niebuhr, "Intellectual Autobiography," Kegley and Bretall, editors, op. cit., pp. 4-5. Hereafter "Intellectual Autobiography."

⁷" . . . I was influenced in my disillusionment more by local than by international experience" (Ibid., p. 6).

⁸Ibid., p. 5.

⁹Ibid., p. 6.

the terrifying plight of the worker and the moralistic pretensions of the owner. In his diary which he religiously kept during this period, Niebuhr records his personal acquaintance with the despicable working conditions of the car industry in Detroit as follows:

We went through one of the big automobile factories today. So artificial is life that these factories are like a strange world to me though I have lived close to them for many years. The foundry interested me particularly. The heat was terrific. The men seemed weary. Here manual labor is a drudgery and toil is slavery. The men cannot possibly find any satisfaction in their work. They simply work to make a living. Their sweat and their dull pain are part of the price paid for the fine cars we all run.¹⁰

Liberal Protestantism, Niebuhr is convinced, is completely powerless before the complexities of our modern world due to its overreadiness to identify this world with the Kingdom of God and liberalism with Christianity without sufficient qualifications. The result was the disappearance of the qualitative distinction of Christian faith in the thought of liberal Protestantism.

. . . 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 center.

¹⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr, Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1966), p. 99. Hereafter LNTC.



Whether irrelevant or not, they were completely futile. They do not change human actions or attitudes in any problem of collective behavior by a hair's breadth, though they may well have helped to preserve private amenities and to assuage individual frustrations.¹¹

Liberalism, both secular and religious, which Niebuhr regards as completely irrelevant, is defined as follows:

I should say primarily faith in man; faith in his capacity to subdue nature, and faith that the subjection of nature achieves life's final good; faith in man's essential goodness, to be realized either when man ceases to be spiritual and returns to nature (romanticism), or when he ceases to be natural and becomes rational; and finally, faith in human history which is conceived as a movement upward by a force immanent within it. Whether this faith rests upon Darwin or upon Hegel, that is whether nature is believed to guarantee progress or whether progress is conceived of as man's "gradual spiritualization" and his emancipation from natural impulses, prejudices and parochial attachments, the optimistic conclusion is the same.¹²

The above quotation suggests that Niebuhr's critique of liberal Protestantism is focalized on the following two issues: the understanding of human nature and history. Protestant liberalism shared the lofty concept of man with secular liberalism. Man is regarded as essentially good and growing more and more rational and ethical as time progresses. Therefore, the Christian form of liberalism agrees with John Dewey's famous dictum that "the egoism of individuals is

¹¹Reinhold Niebuhr, "Ten Years that Shook my World," The Christian Century, IV (April 26, 1939), 545.

¹²Ibid., p. 543.

being progressively checked by the development of rationality . . . and that nothing but the continuance of this process is necessary to establish social harmony. . . ."¹³ Niebuhr's complaint is that, in such an optimism, "the problem of sin is not understood at all,"¹⁴ because the prophetic sense of the judgment of God against man's apostasy and the profound Pauline insight into man's pretension to be his own god are almost completely ignored.

But the truth of the matter is that men simply are not as careful of the interest of their fellow man as they are of their own. And the inability of reason, however highly developed, to overcome this natural bias of the moral imagination makes nonsense of liberal optimism concerning man. Niebuhr writes, "there are definite limits in the capacity of ordinary mortals . . . to grant to others what they claim for themselves."¹⁵ Niebuhr concisely concludes his argument against liberalism's lofty view of man as follows:

The faith of modern man contains two related articles: the idea of progress and the idea of the perfectibility of man. The latter is frequently the basis of the former article. Man is regarded as indeterminately perfectible because it is not understood that every growth of human freedom may have evil as well as virtuous consequences. The

¹³MMIS, p. xii.

¹⁴NDM, I, 145.

¹⁵MMIS, p. 9.



root of this error is that reason is identified with freedom, and it is not seen that reason may be the servant, rather than the master, of the self. This essential religion of modernity is no less "dogmatic" for being implicit rather than explicit, and it is no more true for being arrayed in the panoply of science.¹⁶

The exalted concept of man in the liberal way of thinking is coupled with its incredibly optimistic view of history. One can summarize the liberal view of history by saying that in it history is thought to possess the capacity to fulfill itself in itself. ✓

A single article of faith has given diverse forms of modern culture the unity of a shaded belief. Modern men of all shades of opinion agreed in the belief that historical development is a redemptive process.¹⁷

Since the historical development of man's power and freedom is regarded as the solution for every human perplexity and the way of emancipation from human evil, history is said to be able to carry within itself its own meaning and power of fulfillment. History is regarded essentially as "spirals of advance."¹⁸ Niebuhr rejects this view of history as an example of the manifestation of human pride.

¹⁶"Intellectual Autobiography," p. 15.

¹⁷Reinhold Niebuhr, Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), pp. 1-2. Hereafter FH.

¹⁸Gordon Harland, The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 100.



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.¹⁹

The sentimental version of pacifism which flourished in the pre-World War II period in the United States discloses, in Niebuhr's estimation, the fatal weakness of any utopian view of history. Although pacifism is based upon the false view of man that his selfishness can be easily transformed into brotherly love by rational and emotional persuasion, such an optimism could not have been held among so many people without their explicit or implicit faith in "the gradual triumph of mind over impulse"²⁰ in history. This basic trust in the gradual development of history is so widely accepted by modern man that Niebuhr once went as far as to say, "The dominant note in modern culture is not so much confidence in reason as faith in history."²¹ It is man's blind trust in the gradual development of history that is responsible for the predominant view in the pre-war years that evil forces, even Nazi Germany, would eventually disappear in the process of ongoing history.

¹⁹FH, p. 85.

²⁰Reinhold Niebuhr, Reflections on the End of an Era (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), p. 123. Hereafter REE.

²¹FH, p. 3.

Niebuhr was convinced by the time he wrote Moral Man and Immoral Society in 1932 that Protestant liberalism was hopelessly bankrupt; it was little more than a reinterpretation of Christian faith in accordance with the system of secular values borrowed from the humanism of John Dewey. But Niebuhr was, and is, convinced that neither would man grow increasingly better nor would history eventually fulfill itself.²² The theme of his criticism of liberalism is most concisely stated in his reply to Richard Roberts, the distinguished Canadian liberal Churchman and pacifist of the 1930's and '40's: "Your difficulty is that you want to live in history without sinning. There is no such possibility in history."²³ Thus, Niebuhr's mature doctrine of man is a direct result of his reaction against the complacent optimism of the liberal understanding of human nature and history. As Alan Richardson says, "Their [liberal Christians'] dearest assumptions concerning man's perfectibility, his kinship with the divine, his natural goodness, were all demolished [by Niebuhr] with ruthless iconoclasm."²⁴

²²Reinhold Niebuhr, Pious and Secular America (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 19, 123.

²³Reinhold Niebuhr, "An Open Letter to Richard Roberts," The Christian Century, V (Summer, 1940), 31.

²⁴Alan Richardson, "Reinhold Niebuhr as Apologist," Kegley and Bretall, editors, op. cit., p. 218.

But despite his rigorous criticism of liberalism, both secular and Christian, it would be a mistake to term Niebuhr as a rejector of liberalism in all its aspects. He did reject the optimistic view of man and history which was almost universally held among the liberal philosophers and theologians, in the '30's and '40's, but his own theological orientation demands that one recognize man's moral and rational capacities for good, the initiate possibilities of history. But, further, Niebuhr shares the basic presupposition of liberalism that Christian faith must be related to every concrete issue of human life; it must make a difference to human existence. Therefore the following comment of John C. Bennett seems quite appropriate.

Niebuhr's criticism of the liberal theology which was generally associated with the Social Gospel did not prevent him from working with liberal churchmen with whom he agreed on immediate social goals.²⁵

In this sense, then, Niebuhr's theology may be understood as an attempt to avoid and correct the errors of liberalism, while at the same time preserving its partially valid insights.

B. Marxism

Niebuhr's reaction to liberal Protestantism eventually attracted him to the hard realism of Marxism. Marxism,

²⁵John C. Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethics," Ibid., p. 64.



as it was understood by Niebuhr in his younger days, may be summarized as follows:

In this version [Marxism] the working class, more particularly the class of industrial workers, were constituted into a messianic class whose triumph over their foes would prove, according to their faith, to be not merely a triumph over evil in history. The "saving remnant" of this messianic class would be the "vanguard" of "class-conscious" workers, the members of the Communist party, whose purposes were so identical with the very purposes of history that every weapon became morally permissible to them and every vicissitude of history was expected to contribute to the inevitability of their victory.²⁶

What attracted Niebuhr was the Marxist denunciation of the sentimental optimism of liberalism. Contrary to liberalism, Marxism understands the profound truth that "civilization and cultures do not merely grow, but that they must die and be reborn if they are to have a new life."²⁷ Its imagination of judgment and disaster upon human society, in Niebuhr's estimation, is much more realistic than the progressive view of history. Furthermore, Marxism is biblical in its affirmation that salvation must be for all of history. It reflects the prophetic call for social justice in the Old Testament. Its concern is not "individual emancipation from history's injustices, but the achievement of justice in history."²⁸

²⁶FH, pp. 209-210.

²⁷Ibid., p. 212.

²⁸REE, p. 124.

Thus, the radical realism of Marxism in the midst of shallow progressivism was sufficient to convince Niebuhr in the mid--1930's that Christian hope for the future would lie in the establishment of a synthesis "between the Marxian and the pure Christian mythology."²⁹ This meant that Marxism would provide the social strategy, and Christianity, with agape as the norm of every human conduct, would check the illusory hope of Marxism that "a kingdom of pure love can be established in history and that its vindictive justice will be transmuted into pure justice."³⁰ His leaning toward Marxism was such that, in the 1930's, he often referred to himself as a "Christian Marxist."³¹

However, it must be noted that Niebuhr was never in any sense a doctrinaire Marxist. Even during those years he never had any serious illusions about Marxism. Although Marxism is sufficiently critical of the illusions of the bourgeois civilization, Niebuhr is convinced that it fails to be critical of its own dogmatic utopianism. Its failure, according to Niebuhr, lies in its false view of man and history which is strangely akin to that of the bourgeois

²⁹Ibid., p. 135.

³⁰Ibid., p. 136.

³¹For an excellent analysis of the influence of Marxist thought in the intellectual pilgrimage of Niebuhr, see Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Role in American Political Thought and Life," Kegley and Bretall, editors, op. cit., pp. 126-150.

civilization. In Marxism the essential nature of man is identified simply with the state of innocency which existed before the rise of private property. Sin is found only in the bourgeoisie, not in the proletariat; it is defined as the economic pressures imposed upon the poor by the rich. Consequently, the Marxist view of history is essentially utopian;³² evils in history would simply disappear "after all the enemies of this new commonwealth were defeated."³³ In short, it "worships a god who is the unqualified ally of one group in human society against all others."³⁴ Such a philosophy eventually becomes demonic and cruel, because it sees itself as the truth and nothing but the truth.

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.³⁵

The tendency of Marxism to breed a reckless fanaticism and to create a cruel political tyranny was, according to Niebuhr, unambiguously revealed in the Moscow trials of 1938

³²At least Marxism recognizes the necessity of judgment on history before a new life begins. In this sense it is a "hard optimism" in contrast to the "soft optimism" of natural progressivism (FH, p. 208).

³³Ibid., p. 210.

³⁴Ibid., p. 211.

³⁵MMIS, p. 194.



and the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939. Therefore, in his latter writings Niebuhr rejected Marxism as a possible alternative to capitalism. His understanding of the heights and depths of man's radical freedom has made him increasingly aware of "the principles of pluralism in an open society"³⁶ and the inherent danger of the totalitarian tendencies of Marxism which "made the Stalinist despotism almost inevitable."³⁷

D. Kierkegaard and Pascal

Niebuhr maintains that the most important contribution of the Biblical doctrine of man is its understanding of the paradoxical nature of human selfhood. But it is primarily through his encounter with Kierkegaard and Pascal that he discovers this Biblical insight. It is therefore appropriate for us to examine what impact the thoughts of these existentialist thinkers have made upon his thought.

It is Kierkegaard who informed Niebuhr about the "mystery" of human selfhood. "Kierkegaard" says Niebuhr "has interpreted the true meaning of human selfhood more accurately than any modern, and possibly than any previous,

³⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, Man's Nature and His Communities (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), p. 27. Hereafter MNHC.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 21.



Christian theologian."³⁸ More precisely, it is Kierkegaard's understanding of man's paradoxical nature and of the origin of sin that Niebuhr wholeheartedly appropriates. According to Kierkegaard, every man is anxious, because he is free and limited at the same time.

Man is a spirit. But what is a spirit? Spirit is the self. . . . Man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short it is a synthesis.³⁹

Man is in the condition of indeterminate potentiality. Man is confronted with endless potentialities, and he can set no limit to what he ought to be. But, at the same time, this man is limited by nature and unable to choose anything beyond the limitations imposed upon him by nature. Niebuhr likes to quote Kierkegaard's statement: "Truth is exactly the identity of choosing and determining and of being chosen and determined."⁴⁰

It is also from Kierkegaard that Niebuhr learns how to understand the meaning of original sin without falling into either literalism or obscurantism. Kierkegaard rejects the idea that individual sin could be necessitated by Adam's

³⁸NDM, I, 170-171.

³⁹Søren Kierkegaard, The Sickness unto Death, trans. Walter Lawrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 17.

⁴⁰NDM, I, 163, citing Entweder Oder Band, II, p. 182.

Fall. He takes the story of Genesis as symbolic of what happens in the experience of every man. Ultimately original sin is mysterious. No doctrine can ever fully account for the fact that man is fallen. "Sin posits itself."⁴¹ But Kierkegaard insists that there is a psychological explanation. Suspended between spirit and nature, man is always anxious. Thus man's position is not only above the brutes; it is intrinsically more precarious. And man always tries to run away from the state of anxiety to the state of the subhuman existence in his own freedom. Sin therefore is to be regarded neither as a necessity of man's nature nor yet as a pure caprice of his will. In accepting all this, Niebuhr regards Kierkegaard's assertion that "sin comes as neither necessity nor accident"⁴² as entirely correct.

Niebuhr finds an equally profound treatment of the self in Pascal. Pascal, too, stresses the mystery of human selfhood. Man's creativity is so great that its scope is unlimited, but, due to his nature, he is too limited to be God. Furthermore, it is man's strength that is the basic cause of his misery. And, with Kierkegaard, Pascal readily acknowledges the logical absurdity of the doctrine of original sin without discarding its meaning. Thus, Niebuhr

⁴¹NDM, I, 252.

⁴²Ibid., p. 243, citing Begriff der Angst, p. 95.

agrees with Pascal's statement, "Certainly nothing offends us more rudely than this doctrine, and yet without this mystery, the most incomprehensible of all, we are incomprehensible to ourselves."⁴³

It is clear then that Niebuhr considers both Kierkegaard and Pascal as his mentors who helped him discover the paradox of the self as well as sin that arises from it. But, like all men of true creativity, Niebuhr does not simply repeat what his mentors have said. Instead, he proceeds to impliment them whenever it is necessary for him to do so. He, for example, does not accept uncritically Kierkegaard's doctrine of "leap." Niebuhr rejects the Kierkegaardian dictum that faith is absurd. His rejection, interestingly enough, is based upon his own understanding of the Kierkegaardian paradox of man. Niebuhr maintains that in his pursuit for the passionate subjectivity of religious truth, Kierkegaard unintentionally dissolves the tension between spirit and nature. He thinks that Kierkegaard ignores the fact that man's spirit forces him to find meaning beyond himself, and that man's nature compells him to see the source of meaning operative in the world. So Niebuhr writes:

⁴³Blaise Pascal, Pensees, trans. W. F. Trotter (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1958), p. 121.

A "hidden Christ" operates in history. And there is always the possibility that those who do not know the historical revelation may achieve a more genuine repentance and humility than those who do. If this is not kept in mind the Christian faith easily becomes a new vehicle of pride.⁴⁴

Niebuhr also corrects Pascal from the point of the paradoxical nature of man. He thinks that Pascal fails to do justice to his own understanding of man's paradox when he writes that there are only two kinds of men: "the righteous who believe themselves sinners" and "sinners who believe themselves righteous."⁴⁵ Niebuhr's argument is that Pascal is not sufficiently sensitive to the infinite scope of human freedom which does not allow us to make any clear-cut distinction between the "two kinds of men." Human realities are far more complex and intricate than Pascal's above statement seems to indicate. Pascal is right in seeing the spiritual root of human sin, says Niebuhr, but wrong in limiting the scope of sin too narrowly. Niebuhr concludes:

Pascal does not fully appreciate, at least as far as this statement is concerned, how infinite may be the shades of awareness of guilt from the complacency of those who are spiritually blind to the sensitivity of the saint who knows that he is not a saint.⁴⁶

⁴⁴NDM, II, 109-110.

⁴⁵Quoted in NDM, I, 257.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 257.



E. Augustine

Although Niebuhr's thinking is inseparable from Kierkegaard and Pascal, he singles out Augustine as the theologian who has emancipated him "from the notion that the Christian faith was in some way identical with the moral idealism of the past century."⁴⁷ In the following few pages we shall seek to probe the nature of this statement.

Augustine's influence upon Niebuhr's thought is especially conspicuous in the doctrine of sin. However, this point can be elucidated only when we see Augustine's understanding of man's ability to transcend himself. In Augustine, man's self-transcendence is not equated with reason; it is more than discursive reasoning or the ability to form general concepts. Augustine discovers the scope of self-transcendence in the human memory.

There [in memory] . . . I meet with myself, and recall myself and when and where and what I have done and under what feelings. . . . Out of the same store do I myself with the past continually combine fresh likenesses of things, which I have experienced, have believed; and thence again infer further actions, events and hopes, and all these again I reflect on, as present.⁴⁸

Since the scope of self-transcendence is infinite, nothing other than God can satisfactorily fulfill it. That is to say, man can point to God in his self-transcendence,

⁴⁷"Intellectual Autobiography," p. 9.

⁴⁸NDM, I, 155.

but he cannot become God himself. "To reach God by the mind in any measure is a great blessedness," says Augustine, "but to comprehend Him is altogether impossible."⁴⁹ That this is exactly Niebuhr's understanding of self-transcendence will become clear as we probe further his doctrine of man. Here it is important for us to note that both Augustine and Niebuhr relate man's self-transcendence to sin. This is where Niebuhr is most indebted to Augustine. Augustine maintains that the world is good, because God created it. The good nature of man has been corrupted and his sin affects all aspects of human life. Augustine goes on to say that sin has a single origin in man's self-contradictory self-assertion. Man is by his created nature made to obey and to glorify God who made him good. As his primary goodness consists in adhering to God, so his primal sin lies in turning away from God to himself. Sin is man's attempt to be God. Niebuhr accepts Augustine's doctrine of sin wholeheartedly except for the latter's view of the historical Adam. He frankly admits that it is Augustine who has taught him that "it is not finiteness but the 'false eternal' of sin . . . which brings confusion and evil into history."⁵⁰

⁴⁹Ibid., pp. 157-158.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 158. Augustine's definition of sin which is quoted by Niebuhr is as follows: "What could begin this evil will but pride, that is the beginning of all sin? And



Niebuhr furthermore shares Augustine's view that sensuality is derived from man's unduly high regard of himself. He asserts with Augustine that in sensuality man's attempt to be more than he is is always involved as the primary drive. With Augustine, Niebuhr does not regard sensuality as a natural fruit of man's finiteness. Both men are quite certain that everything in this world is essentially good because it is God's creation. As we shall see later, Niebuhr repeatedly underscores this point in his discussion of sin as sensuality. Here it will suffice to say that Niebuhr's indebtedness to Augustine is evident in his appropriation of the following statement by Augustine.

We should therefore wrong our Creator in imputing our vices to our flesh: the flesh is good, but to leave the Creator and live according to this created good is mischief.⁵¹ |

Augustine further insists that from the sin of pride arise other disorders in human life. Sin affects man's rational and emotional psychophysical nature. And this root sin is the cause of the social sinfulness of mankind. The very virtues themselves, in which men are trained in society, are perverse, since courage, prudence, and temperance used

what is pride but a perverse desire of height, in forsaking Him to whom the soul ought solely to cleave, as the beginning thereof, to make the self seem the beginning" (Ibid.).

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 231, citing De civ. Dei, Book XIV, Ch. v.



for egoistic or idolatrous ends become "splendid vices." Niebuhr's appreciation of Augustine in this respect is obvious in the theme of Moral Man and Immoral Society.

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 comprise the group, reveal in their personal relationships.⁵²

Niebuhr was influenced by Augustine's views of the limitations of the effectiveness of Christian love in the complex problems of political life. This is especially true in his attempt to relate love with justice in the mundane world. Niebuhr, at the same time, heeds Augustine's advice that human achievements, no matter how high they may be, must never be identified with God's providence, though God certainly uses them for the establishment of His Kingdom. With Augustine he insists upon the infinite chasm between God and man. In fact, this point is so important to Niebuhr that he finds Augustine to be erroneous in his identification of the city of God with the historic church. His correction of Augustine is based upon the Augustinian doctrine of the otherness of God. Niebuhr thinks that Augustine fails to maintain his own theological principle consistently. The basis of Niebuhr's correction of Augustine is this:

⁵²MMIS, pp. xi-xii.

The church, as well as the state, can become the vehicle of collective egotism. Every truth can be made the servant of sinful arrogance, including the prophetic truth that all men fall short of the truth.⁵³

F. Luther and Calvin

Niebuhr is particularly conscious of two dominant ideas in Luther's thought: (1) the inability of man to achieve perfect righteousness and (2) the assurance of justification by faith. It is these two ideas that are again and again affirmed throughout Niebuhr's writing. He accepts as entirely valid Luther's bitter experience that man cannot, by his own initiative and deeds, attain perfect peace and righteousness, although man can envision them in the moments of his self-transcendence. The failure of the method of monastic perfectionism which Luther finally discovered is taken by Niebuhr as an inevitable consequence of man as sinner.

Convinced of the sinfulness of man, Niebuhr, just as did Luther, receives the Pauline word that "the just shall live by faith" as a happy release from the imperious demand of radical perfectionism. Therefore, there is a direct relationship between Niebuhr's attack on the Pope as anti-Christ and Luther's polemic against monasticism. Luther has taught Niebuhr that the pretension of finality and perfection

⁵³NDM, I, 217.

which is so evidently manifest in the Roman Catholic Church has its root in self-righteousness. Both men are convinced that nothing in this world is good enough to be God and that to attempt to be God is the true nature of sin.

Niebuhr's appropriation of Luther in those two points enables him to understand very well the thrust of the latter's theology that the life of the Christian man is a life initiated out of the sense of gratitude to God's love for him. The goodness of man's actions is rooted in God's goodness to man. Man is capable of a new righteousness only in God, because good works are results and not the means of a new life. The full appropriation of this Lutheran affirmation in Niebuhr's thought is clear in the following statement:

. . . Luther comprehends the whole beauty and power of Christian agape, particularly its transcendent freedom over all the prudential considerations of natural ethical attitudes.

He does not deny, in other words, that the new life is capable of a new righteousness. He only insists that it is not justified by them: "A Christian, being consecrated by his faith, does good works; but he is not by these works made a more sacred person or more a Christian. This is the effect of faith alone."⁵⁴

However, Niebuhr does not accept his mentor uncritically. He discovers certain quietistic tendencies in his theology. Convinced that every human action is equally

⁵⁴NDM, II, 186.

tainted by sin, the Reformer, according to Niebuhr, drew the conclusion that man should not participate in social and moral responsibilities in this world. This conclusion further leads him to the equally untenable position: "indifference towards the relative distinctions of truth and falsehood which are so important in the history of culture."⁵⁵ Thus, during the years of the Peasants' Revolts, Luther was totally oblivious to the ethical demands of the peasants and sided with the kings and princes whose chief objective was the maintenance of the status quo of the social structures. In his criticism of Luther's quietism, it is obvious that Niebuhr uses the paradoxical nature of man as the basic criterion of his judgment. Man as nature means that his existence is limited by the social structures of his society. But his spirit does not allow man to be content with those limitations imposed upon him; he seeks ceaselessly to transcend them. Niebuhr's implicit criticism of Luther therefore is that Luther fails to do justice to the dynamic character of human nature.

Niebuhr thinks that Luther's quietism was corrected by Calvin. Calvin's emphasis of the importance of the relationships between Christian faith and secular affairs is much more meaningful to Niebuhr's way of thinking than

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 191.

Luther's attitude of hostility to the world. More than Luther, Calvin looks for the present permeation of all life by the Gospel. But even more, Niebuhr has been influenced by Calvin's insistence that the state is God's instrument not only as a promoter of welfare. Agape must be made effective in the social and political structures of society.

But here again Niebuhr criticizes Calvin on the basis of the paradoxical nature of man. Calvin, in Niebuhr's estimation, overly emphasizes the "divine law" of the Bible without taking into consideration the historical relativities of the Scriptural standards. Thus, man's capacity for rational judgment is unduely minimized. To put his argument in the context of the paradoxical nature of man, Calvin is oblivious to man's spirit which transcends the standards and limitations of any human situation. Niebuhr maintains that Calvin's tendencies toward legalism have roots in his failure to recognize the infinite scope of man's self-transcendence.

G. The Renaissance

Although Niebuhr often engages in sharp polemics against the Renaissance view of man, particularly because of its too high regard for human reason, he does not allow his polemics to blind himself to the contributions made by it. The most important contribution of the Renaissance to anthropology is its clear grasp of the creativity of man. Man as spirit has 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.⁵⁶

This aspect of the Renaissance, in Niebuhr's estimation, has contributed enormously to our understanding of the open society. The humanistic elements of the Renaissance effectively challenged the intolerant and cruel spirit of Catholicism and Protestantism by elucidating the wide relativity of all historical forms. So Niebuhr holds that every human society must be able to accommodate different views and opposing ideas without coercing people to accept a particular set of ideas as the truth. It is precisely this spirit of tolerance and openness that Marxism and fascism do not possess. As we shall point out more fully in our treatment of Niebuhr's concept of the cure for man's sickness, he insists upon the importance of openness particularly in a time like ours when the diversity in political ideologies is most conspicuous.

And yet, Niebuhr puts the Renaissance to task whenever he discusses its tendencies to emphasize man's spirit at the expense of his nature. The Renaissance, just as Catholicism and Protestantism, fails to do justice to the paradoxical nature of man. It forgets that man's spirit is

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 207.

always limited by nature and his freedom is qualified by sin. Here again the criterion of Niebuhr's judgment is made explicit.

II. Reinhold Niebuhr's doctrine of man

The doctrine of man is Niebuhr's most significant contribution to the theology of the 20th century.⁵⁷ The key to his whole exposition of the doctrine of man is the paradoxical nature of man. Throughout the entire corpus of his writing, Niebuhr repeatedly underscores it and seeks to relate it concretely to the areas of man's original nature, his sin, and salvation. In fact, the dialectical nature of man is so important to him that he delineates it both psychologically and biblically. Here we see his belief that theology not being related to common human experience is powerless; at the same time, common human experience is given a new level of understanding if it is discussed in the context of theology. Bearing this assumption of Niebuhr in mind, we shall proceed to examine Niebuhr's doctrine of man in the following three parts: (1) the essential nature of man and the problem of his existence, (2) the sin of man, and (3) the restoration of human nature.

⁵⁷William John Wolf, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man," Kegley and Bretall, editors, *op. cit.*, p. 230.



A. The essential nature of man and the problem of his existence

1. The essential nature

The essential nature of man is found at a juncture between nature and spirit. As Niebuhr writes in his Gifford Lectures:

The obvious fact is that man is a child of nature, subject to its vicissitudes, compelled by its necessities, driven by its impulses, and confined within the brevity of the years which nature permits its varied organic form, allowing them some, but not too much latitude. The other less obvious fact is that man is a spirit who stands outside of nature, life, himself, his reason and the world.⁵⁸

Thus, man's essential nature is the paradoxical relationship of the limited and limitless character of man. In this section, we shall investigate what this paradox really entails.

a) Man as nature

By man as nature, Niebuhr means that man is subject to the contingencies of nature and therefore is a "creature of necessity."⁵⁹ He needs air to breathe and shelter under which to abide; he needs the nourishment of food for the maintenance of his most minimum organic existence. Beyond this, his nature is determined by linguistic particularity, his physical and social impulses, and his sexual and racial

⁵⁸NDM, I, 3.

⁵⁹BT, p. 292.