

Sex is created to be good, because it, too, is God's creation. But just like anxiety, sexual impulse is the source of creativity and sinfulness. Sex then is an occasion for sin.

. . . once sin is presupposed, that is once the original harmony of nature is disturbed by man's self-love, the instincts of sex are particularly effective tools for both the assertion of the self and the flight from the self. . . . It is both a vehicle of the primal sin of self-deification and the expression of an uneasy conscience, seeking to escape from self by the deification of another.<sup>147</sup>

But, at the same time, sex expresses the extreme form of man's escape from his freedom—"a plunge into unconsciousness."<sup>148</sup>

The ego, having found the worship both of self and of the other abortive, may use the passion of sex, without reference to self and the other, as a form of escape from the tension of life. The most corrupt forms of sensuality, as for instance in commercialized vice, have exactly this characteristic, that personal considerations are excluded from the satisfaction of the sexual impulse. It is a flight not to a false god but to nothingness.<sup>149</sup>

What is abundantly clear to Niebuhr is that man is responsible for every form of the perversion of sex, for man in his freedom uses sex for the enhancement of pride as well as for escape from freedom. Therefore, the sense of guilt

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., pp. 236-237.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 239.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 237.

and shame always co-exist with his sexuality.<sup>150</sup> It is this ambiguous nature of sex that is always ignored by Freudian psychoanalysis and rigorous asceticism. The former ignores the fact that sex is an occasion for sin, making the sense of guilt attached with sex abnormal and unnecessary.<sup>151</sup> The latter is blind to the fundamental affirmation of the Biblical faith that nature, being God's creation, is good.<sup>152</sup>

It is clear then that Niebuhr maintains that sensuality expresses itself most vividly in sex. To put it differently, our attitude toward sex depends largely upon how well we understand the nature of man. The crude naturalism of

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<sup>150</sup>"The profundity of the account of the Fall in Genesis cannot be overestimated. For though the account describes sin as primarily disobedience to God through the temptation of pride and not as sensual passion, it understands that guilt becomes involved in sensual passion after the Fall, for man becomes suddenly conscious of his sexuality: 'And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons' (Gen. 3:7)" (NDM, I, 238).

<sup>151</sup>"The idea of modern psychology, particularly Freudian psychology, that this sense of guilt is abnormal, unnecessary and entirely due to the repressions of civilization, is a consequence of a too superficial view of the complexities of the relationship of spirit to nature. The sense of shame in relation to sex antedates the conventions of civilized society . . . " (Ibid.).

<sup>152</sup>" . . . Christian puritanism and asceticism have usually been just as much in error in their effort to eliminate the sin attached to and expressed in sex by undue repressions. Such efforts have not only aggravated the sexual problem but have contributed to the self-righteous fury of those who sin covertly in matters of sex against those who sin overtly" (Ibid., p. 239).





our culture with regard to sex indicates the shallowness of the commonly held view of man in the present time. To illustrate this point, Niebuhr puts the Kinsey report to a rigorous test.

If the Christian faith has failed to bring the tumultuous stuff of the sexual life under adequate discipline or sublimation, the philosophy behind the Kinsey report proposes to solve the problem, simply by ignoring all deeper aspects of human existence. Sexual drives are analysed as if they were merely biological impulses, and "sexual objects" are discussed as if "impulses" had to find their "objects" without the overarching of personality in each case.

Even more dangerous is the assumption that new forms can be created by a statistical study of the actual sex practices of the day. Here we have the modern sociological approach to the problem of norms reduced to its final absurdity. A learned doctor, reviewing the Kinsey report asks the relevant question, whether the fact that most people have colds in the winter establishes the cold as "normative."<sup>153</sup>

### C. The cure for sin

In our discussion of Niebuhr's understanding of human sin, we have made the point that, contrary to the general view held by many of his critics, Niebuhr's main concern is to affirm the infinite goodness of God which will ultimately overcome the ambiguities of human life rather than making sin the central theme of his doctrine of man. His unusually

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<sup>153</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Sex and Religion in the Kinsey Report," Christianity and Crisis, XIII (November 2, 1953), 139.

penetrating analysis of sin is a necessary preparation for this climactic point in his thought. In our discussion of Niebuhr's cure for sin, we seek to elucidate how this is the case. Our analysis of his doctrine of man is incomplete without talking about both human nature and human destiny. One without the other will seriously distort the true view of man. We are helpless sinners, but our destiny is in God's hands; therefore, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. It is this affirmation that runs through Niebuhr's thought. And it is in his discussion of the cure for sin that this affirmation is made most effective. What he wants to communicate to the believers as well as to the intellectual despisers of Christian faith is not cynicism about the wretchedness of man; rather, it is everlasting hope rooted in the goodness of God. Bearing this in mind, let us probe Niebuhr's concept of the cure for sin.

### 1. Presuppositions

In order to understand Niebuhr's concept of the cure for sin, we must uncover the following two presuppositions that are most basic to it. First, the dialectical nature of man provides the ground for the restoration of his health. Second, there are no possibilities for the sinless individual or the perfect society in history. Let us see what these two presuppositions further entail.



The cure for human sin is directly related to the problem of man's historical existence. Man is both nature and spirit. This ontological state of man involves him in both time and eternity. Since man is a creature, he belongs to the successive series of time. Since he is more than just a creature, he must make sense out of the mere successive-ness of time, Man's infinite capacity for self-transcendence enables him to find partial realizations of the ultimate in this world.<sup>154</sup> Here Niebuhr directly opposes Karl Löwith, who denies any relationship between faith and history. Löwith makes his point thus:

. . . since the story of salvation does not refer to historical empires, nations, and civilizations but to each human soul, one cannot dismiss the thought that Christianity, that is, faith in Christ, is essentially indifferent over against world-historical differences, even over against the difference between civilization and barbarism.<sup>155</sup>

Niebuhr rejects Löwith's view, for he is convinced that man's spirit does not allow him to be a passive observer of the world about him, and that God's revelation fulfills and does not destroy man's historical existence. Man looks for

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<sup>154</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermon for Today and Tomorrow (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), p. 154. Hereafter DST.

<sup>155</sup> Karl Löwith, "History and Christianity," Kegley and Bretall, editors, op. cit., p. 289.

. . . an ultimate order beyond the incoherences, incongruities and cross-purposes, and creates or accepts the presupposition of a divine providence, related to the ultimate source of the temporal process.<sup>156</sup>

It is this search for the ultimate meaning of life in history that finally distinguishes man from other animals.<sup>157</sup>

Man is a being who can never exist without a god or gods. He must have some things to which he can cling as the sources and goals of his life. Thus, Niebuhr will completely agree with the statement made by his brother, Richard, in The Meaning of Revelation, "It is no less true that man is a believing animal . . . than that he is a rational animal."<sup>158</sup>

As we shall see later, the meaning of which Niebuhr speaks is ultimately fulfilled by the victory of good over evil brought about by God in history and completed beyond history. But what must be underscored here is the contention of Niebuhr that man's radical freedom prepares him for God's revelation by making him aware of his finite existence and enabling him to ask the ultimate meaning of his life.

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<sup>156</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, Faith and Politics: A Commentary on Religious, Social and Political Thought in a Technological Age, ed. Ronald H. Stone (New York: George Braziller, 1968), p. 8.

<sup>157</sup>Daniel Day Williams observes that in Niebuhr's thought, "no term appears more frequently than 'meaning'" ("Niebuhr and Liberalism," Kegley and Bretall, editors, op. cit., p. 206).

<sup>158</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962), p. 77.



The dialectical nature of man further explains why he needs God's special revelation. Being a creature of nature, he must find meaning in this world. But being spirit, he needs the source of his meaning to be transcendent over nature. In other words, the source of the meaning of human life must be related to and, at the same time, transcend nature. To complicate the matter even further, man's radical freedom cannot create its meaning by itself, because it does not have its own principle of order within itself, but requires a principle outside itself for its completion. What is this principle? Niebuhr's answer is this: "A suffering divine love is the final coherence of life."<sup>159</sup>

Niebuhr insists that no other alternatives are able to do what Christian faith can do. Rationalism, both classic and modern, does not do justice to the infinite scope of man's self-transcendence, because human reason is regarded as man's highest virtue. Romanticism also fails in developing an appropriate anthropology.

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.<sup>160</sup>

In short, romanticism, as does rationalism, fails to grasp the heights and depths of human freedom. Idealism, on the

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<sup>159</sup>CRPP, p. 184.

<sup>160</sup>NDM, I, 40.

other hand, does not understand the finiteness of man. Since it regards the true self as "that reason which relates the self to the universal,"<sup>161</sup> man's dialectical character finally breaks down. The consequence is that "the actual self is really absorbed in the universal."<sup>162</sup> Nor can naturalism present an adequate anthropology, because its emphasis is upon the vitalities of nature. The self therefore is dealt with as a piece of nature. It ignores the fact that man's radical freedom "makes for the uniqueness of the individual about which nature knows nothing."<sup>163</sup>

The common failure of those systems is that they do not understand the dialectical nature of man. In the final analysis, they destroy the paradox of man by either emphasizing spirit over nature or emphasizing nature over spirit. We shall examine in the next section why agape alone can do justice to the paradoxical character of man and therefore is the only norm for human life. Here it suffices to point out that in Niebuhr's thought the dialectical nature of man presents itself as the ground for his cure in the sense that it looks for meaning in life and history as well as for the source of meaning that transcends life and history.

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<sup>161</sup>Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>162</sup>Ibid.

<sup>163</sup>Niebuhr, "Sex and Religion . . .," op. cit., p. 139.





The other presupposition of Niebuhr's concept of the cure for sin is that there are no possibilities for the sinless individual or the perfect society in history. The scope of human sin is such that there has not been and will never be a time when there is no sin. The more man's rational and technical abilities increase, the more compounded his sin becomes. This explains why Niebuhr rejects both Dewey and Marx as essentially utopian. Both men share the belief that there will be a perfect society in history, if man develops his reason to the fullest or establishes a society governed by the proletariat. Neither Dewey nor Marx is aware of the diverse character of history which is derived from human radical freedom and sin. Both the individual and civilization are a complex mixture of creativity and the pretension to be God. Therefore Niebuhr writes, "Neither utopian nor purely otherworldly conceptions of fulfillment do full justice to the paradoxical relation of the individual to the historical process."<sup>164</sup>

Niebuhr's rejection of any kind of utopianism leads us to a discussion of the necessity of the use of force and the functions of reason in his thought. Niebuhr maintains throughout the entire corpus of his writings that Christians must not fear power; they must use it constructively. He

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<sup>164</sup>NDM, II, 312.

constantly attacks "modern Christian and secular perfectionism"<sup>165</sup> because it is both bad religion and bad politics. It is bad religion because its failure to grasp the depths of human sin makes man too callous to understand the love of God that finally overcomes sin for the sake of man. It is bad politics because it is completely incapable of dealing with the complexities of human realities. In Niebuhr's thought, power means coercive force. And the cure for sin largely rests upon how effectively we can use it to establish justice in our society. Niebuhr still maintains the following statement made in 1932 as the ultimate goals of society.

His [man's] concern for some centuries to come is not the creation of an ideal society in which there will be uncoerced and perfect peace and justice, but a society in which there will be enough justice, and in which coercion will be sufficiently non-violent to prevent his common enterprise from issuing into complete disaster.<sup>166</sup>

It is to be noted, however, that Niebuhr does not always discard pacifism as completely irrelevant. He believes, instead, that it can render very effective coercive force in certain situations. For example, American Negroes can and must make use of pacifism in their struggle for

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<sup>165</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, Christianity and Power Politics (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), p. ix.

<sup>166</sup>MBIS, p. 22.



justice and equality. Writing at a time when protest marches were hardly thought of, Niebuhr said:

Boycotts against banks which discriminate against Negroes in granting credit, against stores which refuse to employ Negroes while serving Negro trade, and against public service corporations which practice racial discrimination, would undoubtedly be crowned with some measure of success.<sup>167</sup>

It is clear then that Niebuhr sees two kinds of pacifism. One is the liberal pacifism of the 1920's, best represented by Richard Roberts. This view, in Niebuhr's estimation, is essentially an egotistical attempt to escape from involvement in the suffering of others. The other is nonviolent protest which was so effectively led by Martin Luther King. Thus, in criticizing Niebuhr for defining pacifism exclusively as "passive nonresistance to evil,"<sup>168</sup> King fails to take into account the fact that Niebuhr believes nonviolent methods to be most effective under certain circumstances.

Power for Niebuhr means coercive force. Therefore, it can be either nonviolent or violent. The point he makes repeatedly is that power will not disappear from human life, no matter how high man's rational and technical abilities may grow in the future. His rejection of utopianism means

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<sup>167</sup>

Ibid., p. 254.

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Martin Luther King, Jr., Stride Toward Freedom (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1958), p. 80.



the realization that there will never be a perfect society or a sinless individual whose maturation is such that he needs no coercion.

According to Niebuhr, reason plays two very important roles in the cure for sin. And these two functions are related to the use of power in human society, as well as to his rejection of any kind of utopianism. The first function of reason has to do with discriminating between types of coercion to be employed. This function of reason is extremely important, because there are obvious differences among evil forces. For example, different kinds of coercive force had to be applied against the Nazis and the British in India. Reason can very well establish the point that non-violent methods were totally incapable of combatting the evil of Nazism, whereas they were probably the only effective counterattack against the colonial imperialism of the British Empire.

The second function of reason has to do with discriminating between the ends for which coercion is used. Reason can tell us that the oppressed and the powerless always possess a higher moral right to challenge their oppressors that the oppressors who seek to maintain the status quo by violence or other subtle means of suppression. Therefore, the rational individual ought to be able to say, for example, that the Negroes, the Jews, and the powerless are perfectly





right in demanding equal justice and that he has to be on their side against injustices imposed upon them. Thus, Niebuhr writes that "the rational use of coercion is a possible achievement which may save society."<sup>169</sup> And yet, reason is no guarantee for peace, because, as we have underscored repeatedly, man's radical freedom always uses reason to enhance his egotism. The white man will use the lack of education and poor living conditions among black men as excuses for maintaining segregation, although he is aware that their disadvantages have been caused by the white society.<sup>170</sup> The Gentile use the thrifty and cunning character of certain Jews as an excuse for the latter's discrimination, although rational thinking enables the Gentiles to understand that the Jews have always been victims of persecution by the Gentiles in the past twenty centuries.<sup>171</sup> The powerful refuse to surrender their power to the weak, holding that the weak do not know how to handle it, although they know very well that the reason for the refusal is their egotistical interest to remain powerful at the expense of other lives.<sup>172</sup> Thus, neither power nor reason will bring about

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<sup>169</sup>MMIS, p. 25.

<sup>170</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. D. D. Robertson (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1967), pp. 142-145.

<sup>171</sup>Ibid., pp. 132-137.

<sup>172</sup>MMIS, p. 117.



everlasting peace among men, because man's radical freedom transcends both of them. That is to say, nothing in this world can overcome sin. This is why there has never been and in all of history never will be the perfect society composed of sinless people.

Having examined the two basic presuppositions that underlie Niebuhr's concept of the cure for human sin, we are now ready to examine Niebuhr's understanding of the source of the cure. We shall begin our discussion with the definition and nature of the source in Niebuhr's thought.

2. The source and nature of the cure

a) The source of the cure

(1) The definition of the source

Niebuhr is perfectly clear that the source of the cure is found neither in nature nor in spirit. He makes this point most explicit in the following paragraph.

An insecure and impoverished self is not made secure by the admonition to be concerned for itself; for an excessive concern for its security is the cause of its impoverishment. Nor is it made secure by the admonition to love others because that is precisely what it can not do because of its anxiety about itself.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, Book Review of Fromm's Man for Himself, Christianity and Society, XIII (Spring, 1948), pp. 27-28.



Instead, Niebuhr stoutly maintains that the self can be cured "only by grace."<sup>174</sup> The source of the cure then is identified with God, Himself.

Niebuhr defines grace concisely as "the conquest of sin in the heart of man on the one hand, and the merciful power of God over the sin which is never overcome in any human heart, on the other."<sup>175</sup> In other words, the Biblical doctrine of grace is interpreted as a power which keeps the relationship of man and God in a dialectical tension so that the one will not contradict the other.

## (2) The locus of grace

The question which follows immediately from the definition of grace is: "Where is God's grace most dynamically and explicitly manifested?" Niebuhr's answer is that the locus of God's grace is sacrificial love which was historically revealed in Jesus Christ. Concretely, it is the agape of the Cross: an utterly unprudential and sacrificial heedlessness. ". . . God is revealed in Christ and more particularly in his Cross."<sup>176</sup> Its content is the love commandment of the Sermon on the Mount: "Thou shalt love thy

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<sup>174</sup>Ibid.

<sup>175</sup>NDM, II, 100. Also "the power of God's love over man, annulling his sin by His mercy" (Ibid., p. 104, ff.).

<sup>176</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

neighbor as Thyself."<sup>177</sup> Agape is the love that refuses to seek its own but spontaneously seeks the neighbor's good. To put the matter differently, "The law of his [man's] nature is love, a harmonious relation of life to life in obedience to the divine centre and source of his life."<sup>178</sup> Niebuhr is insistent on the thesis that there is no other way to symbolize the divine goodness than by God's powerlessness. "The crux 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."<sup>179</sup> The reason for this lies in the incurably ambiguous nature of the world: whenever and wherever power is used, sinful self-assertion enters also.

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. For there is no self in history or society, no matter how impartial its perspective upon the competitions of life, which can rise to the position of a disinterested participation in those rivalries and competitions. It can symbolize disinterested love only by a refusal to participate in the rivalries. Any participation in them means the assertion of one ego interest against another.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>177</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1963), p. 101. Hereafter ICE.

<sup>178</sup>NDM, I, 16.

<sup>179</sup>DST, p. 134.

<sup>180</sup>NDM, II, 72.



### (3) The nature of agape

Contrary to the view held by the liberal theology of the 1920's and 1930's, Niebuhr maintains that agape "transcends history."<sup>181</sup> Its transcendent character is supported by the fact that agape cannot be an actual reality in human history. The reason for this lies in the radical freedom of man. Man in his radical freedom perpetually transcends all the cohesions that make up his communal life; he is not bound by any of them. Therefore, Niebuhr can say that

. . . there is . . . no possible historical state of man, however primitive the society, or however undeveloped the child, in which there is harmony without freedom. An inchoate freedom has already disturbed the harmony of nature. This is one reason why it is not possible to assign a historical locus to the perfection before the fall; . . .<sup>182</sup>

The transcendent character of agape can be expressed differently by saying that "love cannot justify itself in history."<sup>183</sup> Niebuhr explains the reason as follows:

It [heedless love] makes historical survival more problematic, for it points to the fact that the highest form of human goodness embodies a heedlessness of self which endangers the self and its physical security.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>181</sup>Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>182</sup>Ibid., p. 78. Also, "Where there is history at all there is freedom; and where there is freedom there is sin" (Ibid., p. 80).

<sup>183</sup>Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>184</sup>FH, p. 197. Also, ". . . heedless love usually wins a response of love. That is a symbol of the moral

Elsewhere Niebuhr expresses the same point thus:

The ethic of Jesus does not deal at all with the immediate moral problem of every human life--the problem of arranging some kind of armistice between various contending factions and forces. It has nothing to say about the relativities of politics and economics, nor of the necessary balances of power which exist and must exist in even the most intimate social relationships. The absolutism and perfectionism of Jesus' love ethic sets itself uncompromisingly not only against the natural self-regarding impulses, but against the necessary prudent defenses of the self required because of the egoism of others.<sup>185</sup>

In short, agape does not guarantee any kind of immediate reward in history. This is precisely why the powerless goodness of Jesus Christ finally ended upon the Cross;<sup>186</sup> when love enters the world of relative justice and balanced egotism, it is destroyed in it. Consequently the suffering servant dies on the Cross. Though agape transcends history and cannot justify itself in history, it is the only true norm of man who is both nature and spirit, because it finds itself in a profound dialectical relationship: love is both "in" and "over" history. This thesis of Niebuhr is validated by the basic presupposition of his anthropology: man is both nature and spirit. Man is nature; therefore, he

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content of history. But this response cannot be guaranteed, as modern thought sought erroneously to guarantee it" ("Reply," p. 442).

<sup>185</sup>ICE, p. 45.

<sup>186</sup>DST, pp. 142-143.



must find meaning in history. Man is spirit; therefore, that meaning must transcend the purely historical.

Each individual transcends and 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. In so far as he transcends history the source of life's meaning must transcend history.<sup>187</sup>

The question as to how agape can be both transcendent and historical at the same time receives the clearest answer in Niebuhr's elaboration of love as an "impossible possibility."<sup>188</sup> This idea is based upon the presupposition that although the perfect realization of love in this world is impossible, "the prophetic tradition in Christianity must insist on the relevance of the ideal of love to the moral experience of mankind on every conceivable level."<sup>189</sup> The transcendent character of love then is identified with the impossibility of love. Love never ceases to be in the realm of approximation.<sup>190</sup> Therefore, "the ideal in its perfect

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<sup>187</sup>NDM, II, 36.

<sup>188</sup>ICE, p. 110.

<sup>189</sup>Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>190</sup>This is affirmed implicitly by Jesus and explicitly by Paul. Jesus' position on this matter is clear, for example, in Matthew 24:6. "This element in Jesus' own eschatology finally achieves its definitive expression in the figure of the 'Anti-Christ' in the Johannine epistles, who appear at the end of history. Taken seriously, as it should be, this symbol refutes every modern liberal interpretation of history which identifies 'progress' with the Kingdom of God" (NDM, II, 49). Concerning Paul's position, see Niebuhr's exegesis of Galatians 2:20 (Ibid., pp. 107-126).

form lies beyond the capacities of human nature."<sup>191</sup> The failure to grasp the transcendent character of love manifests itself in the sentimentalized version of love held by liberalism.

Modern liberalism significantly substitutes the name of "Jesus" for that of "Christ" in most of the sentimental and moralistic exhortations by which it encourages men to "follow in his steps."<sup>192</sup>

The crux of Niebuhr's whole argument, it must be pointed out again, is found in the incurably sinful nature of man.

The faith which regards the love commandment as a simple possibility rather than an impossible possibility is rooted in a faulty analysis of human nature which fails to understand that though man always stands under infinite possibilities and is potentially related to the totality of existence, he is, nevertheless, and will remain, a creature of finiteness. No matter how much his rationality is refined, he will always see the total situation in which he is involved only from a limited perspective; he will never be able to divorce his reason from its organic relation with the natural impulse of survival with which nature has endowed him; and he will never be able to escape the sin of accentuating his natural will-to-live into an imperial will-to-power by the very protest which his yearning for the eternal tempts him to make against his finiteness.<sup>193</sup>

As the impossible character of love is defined as the transcendent nature, so the possible character of love is identified with its historical nature. Agape presents us, in other words, with a final norm that transcends the range of

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<sup>191</sup>ICE, p. 104.

<sup>192</sup>Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>193</sup>Ibid., p. 110.



possible achievement; but, though it is never fully realized in either intention or action, it makes possible the kind of searching criticism of both intention and action that provided the impetus for the highest moral creativity. Niebuhr summarizes the point as follows:

The law of love is thus a requirement of human freedom; and the freedom of the self and of the other both require it. The freedom of the self is such that no rule of justice, no particular method of arbitrating the interests of the other with those of the self, can leave the self with the feeling that it has done all that it could. In its freedom it constantly rises above these laws and rules and realizes that they are determined by contingent factors and that they fall short of the ultimate possibility of loving the neighbour "as thyself." A sense of justice may prompt men to organize legal systems of unemployment insurance through which a general sense of obligation toward the needy neighbour is expressed. But no such system can leave the self satisfied when it faces particular needs among those who are the beneficiaries of such minimal schemes of justice. The freedom and uniqueness of the other also raises moral requirements above any scheme of justice. The other has special needs and requirements which cannot be satisfied by general rules of equity.<sup>194</sup>

Niebuhr's contention that agape is the only norm for human life and his definition of agape as "impossible possibility" have aroused protest from many of his critics. Their criticism of Niebuhr is based upon their common presupposition that mutual love, not agape, is the norm for human life. Daniel Day Williams and Joseph Fletcher may be singled out as major voices of this protest. According to

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<sup>194</sup>NDM, I, 295.

Williams, Niebuhr's distinction between two kinds of love, sacrificial and mutual love, fragments the "very foundation of the Christian life,"<sup>195</sup> because he extends this distinction into "metaphysical dualism."<sup>196</sup> Williams attempts to substantiate his charge by pointing out that Niebuhr assumes that agape intends a good which does not include the good of the self.<sup>197</sup> The implication of this would be that a Christian could not defend any cause in which his life is involved.<sup>198</sup>

Fletcher makes the same point in his criticism of Niebuhr's concept of love as "impossible possibility." He, too, holds that the norm for human life is mutual love. Therefore, he proposes the definition of love as "possible possibility."

On the contrary, if love is to be understood situationally, as a predicate rather than a property, what we must understand is that Jesus' going to the cross was his role and vocation in his situation with his obligation as the Son of God. We cannot therefore speak with Niebuhr of the "impossibility" of love, even though we join him in speaking of its relativity. Love does not say to us, "Be like me." It says, "Do what you can where you are."<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>195</sup>Daniel Day Williams, God's Grace and Man's Hope (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), p. 75.

<sup>196</sup>Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>197</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>198</sup>Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>199</sup>Fletcher, op. cit., pp. 61-62.





It seems clear that neither Williams nor Fletcher fully understands Niebuhr's concept of agape as the norm for human life. As we have pointed out repeatedly, Niebuhr is convinced that sacrificial love alone can do justice to the paradoxical character of man as self-transcendent and limited by the contingencies of nature. Both Williams and Fletcher completely ignore this point and thus fail to understand Niebuhr's true position. Against Williams, Niebuhr's point is clear. Mutual love is not separated from sacrificial love. For mutual love needs sacrificial love in order to remain both mutual and loving. Without it, mutual love becomes demonic.

If mutual love is not constantly replenished by impulses of grace in which there are no calculations of mutual advantages, mutual relations degenerate first to the cool calculation of such advantages and finally to resentment over the inevitable lack of complete reciprocity in all actual relations.<sup>200</sup>

This is so, because man's radical freedom transcends mutual love. In other words, mutual love has the root of selfishness in it and lends itself so readily to a justification of one's egoism. It can retain its own integrity only when it stands under the scrutiny of the higher ideal of sacrificial love. Therefore, in Niebuhr's thought, mutual love and agape are by no means separated from each other as Williams charges, but they are integrally related to each other.

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<sup>200</sup> FH, p. 185.



Fletcher's criticism of Niebuhr can be rebutted in a similar way. In defining the norm for life as "possible possibility," he fails to understand Niebuhr's concept of man's infinite capacity for self-transcendence and of the scope of human sin. Man, in a moment of self-transcendence, cannot be satisfied with his action no matter how noble his motive may be, and no matter how creative the results of his action may prove to be. For he is always aware of selfishness that constantly affects both his motive and action. Love as "possible possibility," therefore, cannot do justice to the scope of man's radical freedom and sin.

### 3. The nature of the cure

It has been underscored that, in Niebuhr's concept of the cure for sin, the dialectical nature of man as both limited and limitless provides the necessary ground for God's grace that overcomes human sin. In order to discuss Niebuhr's understanding of the nature of the cure, it is necessary to delineate the same point once again. The dialectical nature of man compels him to look for meaning in history, but it also forces man to find the source of meaning beyond history. That is to say, history is meaningful, but its meaning is not complete in itself. It must be transformed and fulfilled by God who transcends history.

It is recognized that history must be purged as well as completed; and that the final completion of



history must include God's destruction of man's abortive and premature efforts to bring history to its culmination.<sup>201</sup>

In this examination of Niebuhr's understanding of the nature of the cure, it is fitting to divide the discussion into the nature of the cure in history and the nature of the cure beyond history.

a) The cure in history

(1) Humility

The sense of humility is brought about by two sources: (1) man's recognition of his finiteness and (2) the sacrificial love of God which was most dynamically manifested in the Cross of Christ. The finiteness of man here includes both man as a creature of nature and man as self-transcendent. Being nature, his existence is dependent upon the contingencies of nature. But, furthermore, his infinite capacity for self-transcendence does not possess in itself the power to fulfill itself. Humility then is caused by man's profound discovery that he is neither omnipotent nor omniscient. Try though as he may, he cannot extract himself from nature. Nor can he know the truth fully or avoid the error of pretending that he does. He cannot be the source of his own existence.

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<sup>201</sup>NDM, II, 4.

The genuine sense of humility, however, is not caused by man's realization of his finiteness alone. It is brought about even more effectively by the Cross which brings man face to face with sin. In God's sacrificial love in Christ, man experiences God's judgment and forgiveness and accepts that God completes for man what man cannot complete for himself. In this sense, true humility is a gift of grace, and not a human achievement. Niebuhr is quite clear about this. He writes that in Christian faith

. . . God is recognized who stands above (and in some sense against) all human judgments; who judges us even while we judge our foe; who completes the drama of history which we always complete falsely because we make ourselves, our culture, and our nation, the premature center of its completion.<sup>202</sup>

This means that humility in the light of the Cross expresses itself in the spirit of forgiveness. Therefore, Niebuhr insists that genuine freedom, in the context of social relationships, is possible only for those who know the infinite scope of their own sin and the infinitely gracious nature of God that overcomes human sin.

## (2) Tolerance

Like humility, the genuine spirit of tolerance is not a human achievement but a gift of grace. The true spirit of tolerance issues from the conviction that all men are equally

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<sup>202</sup>DST, p. 16.





sinful before God and that the forgiving grace of God is available to all sinners. Niebuhr puts it this way.

In a final conflict only those who have learned the grace of humility can be loving, for in a conflict love requires forgiveness and forgiveness is possible only to those who know themselves to be sinners. Moral idealists never forgive their foes. They are too secure in their own virtue to do that. Men forgive their foes only when they feel themselves to be standing under God with them, and feel that under divine scrutiny all "our righteousness is as filthy rags."<sup>203</sup>

Niebuhr further points out that tolerance includes two things: "the ability to hold vital convictions which lead to action" and "the capacity to preserve the spirit of forgiveness towards those who offend us by holding to convictions which seem untrue to us."<sup>204</sup> Like humility, the genuine spirit of tolerance is a gift of grace.

Niebuhr realizes that the two-fold aspect of the spirit of tolerance is never fully achieved in history. Catholicism fails in this, because the Roman Church by definition claims its possession of the whole truth.<sup>205</sup> The intolerance of the Catholic Church is abundantly manifested in the unbelievable cruelties of the Inquisition and the encyclical Immortale Dei of Leo XIII.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>203</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, "When Will Christians Stop Fooling Themselves?" The Christian Century, LI (May 16, 1934), p. 659.

<sup>204</sup>NDM, II, 219.

<sup>205</sup>Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>206</sup>Ibid., p. 222.



The Reformation, however, cannot claim superiority over the Roman Catholic Church in this matter. Its insistence upon "the authority of Scripture, as against the authority of the church, bears within it the perils of a new idolatry."<sup>207</sup> This is so, because the theme of the Reformation, sola Scriptura, has the tendency toward bibliolatry in that it is often transformed into the rigid doctrine that the Bible gives the believer the final truth. The cruel persecutions launched against the Anabaptists by Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli are excellent examples of the tragic nature of the spirit of intolerance.

The certain conviction of the faithful that the Bible gave them the final truth, transcending all finite perspectives and all sinful corruptions, thus contributed to individual spiritual arrogance, no less intolerable than the collective arrogance of the older church.<sup>208</sup>

In short, in its rigid biblicism, the Reformation fails to be faithful to its own profound insight: salvation by grace through faith.<sup>209</sup>

The Renaissance, on the other hand, has contributed a great deal to the spirit of tolerance in modern times. Its achievement "of domestic tranquility without paying the price of tyrannical suppression," says Niebuhr, "is obviously the fruit, primarily, of the movement which we have defined

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., p. 231.





broadly as 'Renaissance.'"<sup>210</sup> In order to clarify this thesis, Niebuhr divides the Renaissance into "the rationalist-humanist wing" and "sectarian Christianity." The former challenged philosophical prejudice and theological dogmatism by emphasizing the importance of empirical observations and by providing wide relativity that exists in all historical forms of culture.<sup>211</sup> The latter, sectarian Christianity, challenged Christian theology from "within the presuppositions of Christian faith"<sup>212</sup> by emphasizing individualism and social radicalism.

Its [sectarian Christianity] mystic certainties transcended the historically conditioned certainties of dogmatic faith. Its individualism challenged the orthodox passion for religious uniformity and its social radicalism set the absolute ethical demands of the gospel against the social compromises which religious authority had prematurely sanctioned.<sup>213</sup>

Whatever their individual emphases may be, both forms of the Renaissance have two things in common: (1) both reject any kind of coercion of the acceptance of certain truths; (2) they are deeply conscious of varieties of human views which make "perfect agreement in the search for truth"

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<sup>210</sup>Ibid.

<sup>211</sup>Ibid., p. 232. Bruno and Descartes lean to the first mode of attack, and Locke and Voltaire to the second.

<sup>212</sup>Ibid.

<sup>213</sup>Ibid.



literally impossible.<sup>214</sup> Although the Renaissance is sufficiently open to other truths, it has its own failure. The failure has to do with the inability to hold certain convictions. Consequently, the Renaissance issues in absolute skepticism.<sup>215</sup> But man, having his radical freedom, cannot be perpetually satisfied with such a philosophical stance.<sup>216</sup> Skepticism often issues in a new form of fanaticism. The problem is nicely posed by Niebuhr.

Loyalty to the truth requires confidence in the possibility of its attainment; toleration of other requires broken confidence in the finality of our own truth. But if there is no answer for a problem to which we do not have the answer, our shattered confidence generates either defeat (which in the field of culture would be scepticism); or an even greater measure of pretension, meant to hide our perplexities behind our certainties (which in the field of culture is fanaticism).<sup>217</sup>

Thus, the Renaissance, too, falls into fanaticism which at first it set out to oppose. When it tries to

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<sup>214</sup>Ibid., p. 234. "Here the Renaissance is more thoroughly in agreement with the Biblical understanding of man as 'creature' and the Christian appreciation of the limits of human knowledge in history than alternative and more orthodox Christian doctrines" (Ibid., p. 235).

<sup>215</sup>Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>216</sup>"Absolute scepticism is rare because the very lack of confidence in the possibility of achieving any valid truth in history presupposes some criterion of truth by which all fragmentary truths are found wanting" (Ibid., pp. 238-239).

<sup>217</sup>Ibid., p. 243.



absolutize the fragmentary truth that history contains nothing but partial perspectives, or when it finds in evolutionary progressivism an answer to "the final problem of truth and falsehood,"<sup>218</sup> it becomes as rigid and intolerant as Catholicism and the Reformation ever were.

Although the perfect spirit of tolerance is not a historical possibility, Niebuhr maintains that Christian faith alone can provide the basis for the approximation of perfect tolerance in history. For to say that Christian faith is a gift of grace means that it is not a simple possession of our own; the universally sinful character of man, clarified in the Cross, compels him to affirm that only in the merciful forgiveness of God, can he possess it "in principle." Thus, the tension between "having, and not having the truth"<sup>219</sup> is possible only in Christian faith. Niebuhr expresses this paradox as follows:

However we twist or turn, whatever instruments or pretensions we use, it is not possible to establish the claim that we have the truth. The truth remains subject to the paradox of grace. We may have it; and yet we do not have it. And we will have it the more purely in fact if we know that we have it only in principle. Our toleration of truths opposed to those which we confess is an expression of the spirit of forgiveness in the realm of culture. Like all forgiveness, it is possible only if we are not too sure of our own virtue.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>218</sup>Ibid., p. 239.

<sup>219</sup>Ibid., p. 213.

<sup>220</sup>Ibid., p. 243.

### (3) Justice

The third aspect of the content of the cure for the sickness of man is the establishment of justice in society. Although Niebuhr does not define justice, his concept of it is clearly articulated. It is effectively expressed by Gordon Harland, who writes that "justice is a relational term in Niebuhr, it is the relative embodiment of agape in the structures of society."<sup>221</sup> The following statement of Niebuhr proves the correctness of Harland's interpretation.

. . . to know both the law of love as the final standard and the law of self-love as a persistent force is to enable Christians to have a foundation for a pragmatic ethic in which power and self-interest is used, begiled, harnessed and deflected for the ultimate end of establishing the highest and most inclusive possible community of justice and order.<sup>222</sup>

This means that for Niebuhr, justice is the most effective form in which love manifests itself in the fallen world. Therefore, justice is always derivative of, but not identical with, agape. "Love is both the fulfillment and the negation of all achievements of justice in history."<sup>223</sup>

This paradoxical relationship between love and justice is most concretely expressed by Niebuhr as follows:

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<sup>221</sup>Harland, op. cit., p. 23.

<sup>222</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, "Christian Faith and Social Action," Christian Faith and Social Action, J. A. Hutchinson, editor (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 241.

<sup>223</sup>NDM, II, 246.





Love is . . . the end term of any system of morals. It is the moral requirement in which all schemes of justice are fulfilled and negated. They are fulfilled because the obligation of life to life is more fully met in love than is possible in any scheme of equity and justice. They are negated because love makes an end of the nicely calculated less and more of structures of justice. It does not carefully arbitrate between the needs of the self and of the other, since it meets the needs of the other without concern for the self.<sup>224</sup>

From the above quotation, it is clear that Niebuhr can effectively refute the criticism of Fletcher that "Niebuhr separated and made them [love and justice] alternatives. . . ." <sup>225</sup> Niebuhr never separates love and justice as alternatives. Being the relative embodiment of love in the structures of society, justice cannot have fixed demands of its own. In short, love is always regarded by Niebuhr as the principle of justice without which justice cannot remain just but eventually becomes a system of the "nicely calculated less or more" of human selfishness. Love clarifies the imperfection of justice and thereby motivates man to aim toward the establishment of ever higher justice. Thus, love and justice are integrally related and not separate alternatives.

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<sup>224</sup>NDM, I, 295. It is important to notice that here Niebuhr is repudiating both the Orthodox tendency toward the separation of love and justice and Liberalism's sentimental doctrine that justice can give place to love if only people become more loving.

<sup>225</sup>Fletcher, op. cit., p. 93.



It is this point that even such a great theologian as Emil Brunner obviously fails to grasp. His criticism of Niebuhr is as follows:

. . . 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. If one uses the term "justice," intending it to be distinguished from the "agape" of the New Testament (which for Niebuhr also is the highest norm), then one is duty-bound to say exactly what this "justice" is as distinguished from love.<sup>226</sup>

As Brunner points out, Niebuhr never defines what justice really is. But Brunner is wrong in his implication that this is so because Niebuhr does not have a clear idea of what justice is. The lack of any clear-cut definition of justice in Niebuhr's thought does not indicate his failure. Rather, it means that Niebuhr takes seriously the thesis that love is always the basis of justice. Justice cannot be clearly defined, because it always aims at the approximation of love in the historically conditioned nature of our sinful world. If we define justice, as Brunner wants to do, we are imposing undue limitations upon love. But to do so is impossible, because being the norm for human life, the scope of love cannot be restricted by any human reason. Niebuhr does not define justice, because it is not an independent entity in itself.

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<sup>226</sup> Emil Brunner, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Work as a Christian Thinker," Kegley and Bretall, editors, op. cit., p. 30.





From this analysis of Niebuhr's concept of justice in relation to the criticism of Fletcher and Brunner, it is clear that the relationship between justice and love is indispensable to his thinking. This problem should be pursued even further. In its relationship to love, justice has both negative and positive aspects. The positive aspect means its function of making love a working force in society. The system of unemployment benefits in a just society is a good example. Although it is true that "the benefits which are paid to the unemployed are almost always higher than the privileged would like to pay" and "lower than the poor would like to receive," they will definitely receive more than "if all of them were dependent upon nothing but vagrant, momentary and capricious impulses of pity."<sup>227</sup>

The negative aspect of justice in relation to love is that justice is full of contradictions in spite of its close tie with love. Although "love can always raise justice to new heights,"<sup>228</sup> it must be pointed out that "all historic conceptions of justice will embody some elements which

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<sup>227</sup>NDM, II, 251.

<sup>228</sup>Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethics," op. cit., p. 59.



contradict the law of love."<sup>229</sup> There is no such thing as perfect justice. Niebuhr is quite clear about this when he writes:

The interests of a class, the viewpoint of a nation, the prejudices of an age and the illusions of a culture are consciously and unconsciously insinuated into the norms by which men regulate their common life. They are intended to give one group an advantage over another. Or if that is not their intention, it is at least the unvarying consequence.<sup>230</sup>

Therefore, justice remains necessary, for even the most just will abuse power by claiming absolute certainty of what is best for others.

The achievement of justice involves the following three elements: order, equality, and freedom. It is to be noted that these three elements are constantly dependent on each other in order to maintain their own identity. Order means social cohesion or "the harmony of communities."<sup>231</sup> As it is necessary for the very existence of society, so it is absolutely necessary for the achievement of justice. But too much emphasis on order at the expense of equality and freedom will subvert justice. Order may be used to suppress change and thus contribute to the maintenance of the unjust

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<sup>229</sup>NDM, II, 256. For Niebuhr's concrete application of this thesis to America see The Irony of American History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), Chapter I.

<sup>230</sup>NDM, II, 256.

<sup>231</sup>Ibid., p. 257.



status quo. This danger, inherent in order, was clear to Niebuhr as far back as 1932.

Southern whites in America usually justify their opposition to equal suffrage for the Negro on the ground of his illiteracy. Yet no Southern State gives equal facility for Negro and white education; and the educated, self-reliant Negro is hated more than the docile, uneducated one.<sup>232</sup>

Equality is a regulative principle of justice, for it provides a kind of criticism which points to the subtle corruptions of self-interest. As John C. Bennett interprets, equality for Niebuhr is "a principle of criticism that shows up the ideological taint, the corruption by the self-interest of the powerful, in all actual structures of justice."<sup>233</sup>

In short, it is an expression of love finding embodiment in the structures of society. "Equality as a pinnacle of the ideal of justice," Niebuhr himself writes, "implicitly points towards love as the final norm of justice; for equal justice is the approximation of brotherhood under the conditions of sin."<sup>234</sup>

From this it naturally follows that "a higher justice always means a more equal justice."<sup>235</sup> And yet, equality without order will result in chaos. The overemphasis of

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<sup>232</sup>MMIS, p. 119.

<sup>233</sup>Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Contribution . . . ," op. cit., p. 73.

<sup>234</sup>NDM, II, 254.

<sup>235</sup>Ibid.



equality at the expense of order is a product of the perpetual self-assertion of man. The underprivileged emphasize the principle of equality without recognizing the differences of need and social function. The privileged, on the other hand, tend to "appropriate an excess of privileges not required by their function; and certainly not in accord with differences of need."<sup>236</sup> In short, equality without order will destroy freedom.

Niebuhr maintains that freedom is another regulative principle of justice. Here by freedom is meant liberty "to develop the essential potentialities of their nature without hindrance."<sup>237</sup> And yet, freedom, if overemphasized, will suppress the spirit of equality by producing great inequalities through its willingness to impose limitation upon another's freedom.

It should be clear, then, that the perfect realization of the balance of order, equality, and freedom is not a historical achievement. But, at the same time, it is possible for us to approximate their balance. This is the "balancing of power" within the society; it is the best approximation of perfect justice in history.

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<sup>236</sup>Ibid., p. 255.

<sup>237</sup>ICE, p. 134.



The domination of one life by another is avoided most successfully by an equilibrium of powers and vitalities, so that weakness does not invite enslavement by the strong. Without a tolerable equilibrium no moral or social restraints ever succeed completely in preventing injustice and enslavement.<sup>238</sup>

In his most recent book, Niebuhr underscores the same point even more strongly. "Our best hope of a tolerable political harmony and of an inner peace," he writes, "rests upon our ability to observe the limits of human freedom, even while we responsibly exploit its creative possibilities."<sup>239</sup>

It is to be noted further that an equalization of power must not take any absolute and unchanging pattern. What justice means in a given time and place depends on the best possible balancing that is workable in that situation. In other words, schemes of justice must be accepted only provisionally; they must be placed constantly under the scrutiny of people. Herein lies the greatest contribution of democracy.

It is the highest achievement of democratic societies that they embody the principle of resistance to government within the principle of government itself. The citizen is thus armed with "constitutional" power to resist the unjust exactions of government. He can do this without creating anarchy within the community, if government has been

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<sup>238</sup>NDM, II, 265.

<sup>239</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, The Structure of Nations and Empires (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), pp. 298-299.



so conceived that criticism of the ruler becomes an instrument of better government and not a threat to government itself.<sup>240</sup>

Thus, the balancing of power is the best check against attempts to absolutize a particular form of power. This political realism, says Niebuhr, has a sound Biblical basis.

The Bible contains two approaches, which taken together and held in balance, do justice to the moral ambiguities of government. According to the one, government is an ordinance of God and its authority reflects the Divine Majesty. According to the other, the "rulers" and "judges" of the nations are particularly subject to divine judgment and wrath because they oppress the poor and defy the divine majesty. These two approaches do justice to the two aspects of government. It is a principle of order and its power prevents anarchy; but its power is not identical with divine power.<sup>241</sup>

#### (4) The nonchalance of faith

From our analysis of Niebuhr's concept of justice, it is obvious that there are no clear-cut solutions to our human problems. We must learn how to live with frustrations without sinking into cynicism or despair. But to do this requires us to establish the source of the meaning of our life in something other than what we hope to accomplish in

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<sup>240</sup>NDM, II, p. 268. In a similar context, Niebuhr expresses the same point concisely as follows: "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary" (The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944, p. xiii).

<sup>241</sup>NDM, II, 269.



the near future. The ultimate meaning of life that braces us for the living of these days is symbolized in the Cross. Although we are perplexed by mysteries of life, in the Cross we know that we are ultimately safe in Him who loves us.

The Christian faith does not pretend to resolve all perplexities. It confesses the darkness of human sight and the perplexities of faith. It escapes despair nevertheless because it holds fast to the essential goodness of God as revealed in Christ, and is therefore "persuaded that neither life nor death--are able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."<sup>242</sup>

The nonchalance of faith is the sense of peace rooted in man's ultimate trust in the goodness of God.

This peace rests upon the faith that God is great enough and good enough to resolve the contradiction in which human life stands; and that His mercy is the final resource of His power, by which He overcomes the rebellion of man against his creator.<sup>243</sup>

Niebuhr maintains that this profound insight into the ultimate nonchalance of faith is the essence of the Protestant doctrine of justification by grace through faith.

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<sup>242</sup>DST, pp. 169-170.

<sup>243</sup>Ibid., p. 193. This point is repeatedly underscored in Niebuhr's exegesis of Paul. Particularly the following are important: "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). "If in this life only we have hope in Christ we are of all men most miserable" (I Cor. 15:19). "I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life . . . shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).



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.<sup>244</sup>

It is the Church, the community of grace, that is required to keep this sense of ultimate nonchalance alive. For him the Church is not the Kingdom of God; but it is surely a "sacrament of the kingdom."<sup>245</sup> Although Niebuhr has never clearly spelled out his ecclesiology, the important function of the Church in this regard is clear in his thinking. For he writes of the Church as follows:

The Christian church is a community of hopeful believers, who are not afraid of life or death, of present or future history, being persuaded that the whole of life and all historical vicissitudes stand under the sovereignty of the holy, yet merciful, God whose will was supremely revealed in Christ. It is a community which does not fear the final judgement, not because it is a community of forgiven sinners, who know that judgement is merciful if it is not evaded. If the divine judgement is not resisted by pretensions of virtue but is contritely accepted, it reveals in and beyond itself the mercy which restores life on a new and healthier basis.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> NDM, II, 284.

<sup>245</sup> Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Contribution . . . ," op. cit., p. 22.

<sup>246</sup> FH, p. 238.



## b) The cure beyond history

Having identified the nature of the cure for sin in history in Niebuhr's thought as humility, tolerance, justice, and the nonchalance of faith, it is appropriate to examine his understanding of the cure for sin beyond history. It is essential to remember in this context that it is his concept of the cure beyond history that enables him to be constantly hopeful, no matter how hopeless and futile the nature of the cure in history may at times seem to him. It is this ultimate hopefulness that underlies his whole writings. We are ultimately in the hands of God whatever may happen to us; therefore, we can face our discouraging world not trusting ourselves or our world, but trusting the inestimable grace of God. Admittedly, this concept of the cure beyond history is not a rational one. Since it transcends history, human reason cannot fully grasp it. But man's infinite capacity for self-transcendence can point to it. Without possessing the capacity to fulfill itself, man's self-transcendence is satisfied with nothing but the eternal. Thus, man's radical freedom can expect fulfillment beyond history, although it cannot fully comprehend it.

How should the nature of the cure beyond history be articulated? No ordinary human language would do, since it can deal adequately only with the historical and the rational. This difficulty Niebuhr seeks to resolve by the