

Niebuhr Reexamined: Christian Realism and the Liberal Tradition

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IN THE 1957 preface to his *Social Thought in America: The Revolt against Formalism* Morton White contentiously, and with less grace and humor than is his custom, stated that his book "is in no sense to be identified with the more recent revivals of religious, conservative, and obscurantist thinking which have attempted to discredit and seriously lower the reputation of liberalism and secularism in social, political, and moral affairs."¹ Religious obscurantism, of course, applied to what White took to be Reinhold Niebuhr's subversion of the liberal, secular, pragmatic tradition to which White was sympathetic. White's alarm echoed the acute distress of Sidney Hook, a no less tenacious but more ill-tempered liberal partisan, a decade and a half earlier that there was a new failure of nerve abroad in Western civilization marked by an irresponsible flight from faith in intelligence and the free market of ideas. Hook too identified Niebuhr as the chief villain of this religious fundamentalism and philosophical obscurantism.²

The secular counterattack must have found its mark, for Niebuhr subsequently

repented his youthful, pedagogical error of labeling man's persistent and universal self-love "Original Sin" because such a theological doctrine was "anathema to modern culture,"³ though he still believed it an empirically verifiable doctrine. There is, however, no reason to doubt Niebuhr's reassurance he had always intended to render his "realist conception of human nature" a servant of progressivism rather than conservatism. The secular, liberal men of good faith were, I believe, quite misled in ever suspecting otherwise. Niebuhr's effective separation of ethics and politics and his countervailing power system of social ethics place him squarely in the pragmatic tradition. Faith and reason comfortably cohabited in the post-progressive liberalism of the Americans for Democratic Action, and Professor White himself concedes that Niebuhr voted the right way, despite his wrong thinking. Protestant neo-orthodoxy and the scientific method both terminated in the Neutral Society.

It was in the crucible of World War I, a lost peace, depression, and industrial strife that Reinhold Niebuhr rejected the

liberal philosophy with which he had begun his ministry and formulated what came to be known as Christian realism. The liberalism, whether of secular or religious variety, Niebuhr abandoned was not merely an economic or social theory but the whole view of human nature which underlay those theories.⁴ Indeed, it was a faith in human nature itself, a faith in the essential goodness and wisdom of man and in the progressively upward movement of human history, which he found deficient. Whether expressed in the Christian social gospel's reliance upon individual moral suasion or the secular faith in the possibilities of emancipated social intelligence, liberalism for Niebuhr represented "a kind of blindness to which those are particularly subject who imagine that their intelligence has emancipated them from all the stupidities of the past. . . . Liberalism is not only a form of blindness. It is a blindness difficult to cure, because it is a disease among classes who imagine themselves particularly clear-eyed."⁵ Among its credos which Niebuhr found fatuous were the following: that injustice is caused by ignorance and is amenable to education; that civilization is becoming more moral and that it is, therefore, wrong to challenge gradualness; that the character of individuals, not social systems, is the guarantor of justice; that appeals to love and brotherhood would ultimately be efficacious; that goodness brings happiness and that an awareness of this will overcome human selfishness; that wars are tragic errors of stupid people.

Niebuhr's pastoral experience in the strike-ridden Detroit of the 1920's convinced him that liberals, religious and secular alike, failed to take a hard and full enough view of human nature and, consequently, failed to appreciate the ineradicable element of egoism in all human action. Man was an inherently self-regarding creature, and if it was barely possible for in-

dividuals to transcend the taint of self-interest to achieve a degree of mutuality in their relations, it was altogether impossible for social groups to do so. Hence social relations were a state of perpetual warfare where power must be pitted against power. In the manifesto of his radical pessimism, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr depicted the intractability of collective egoism and the resulting ineluctable social conflict:

What is lacking among all these moralists, whether religious or rational, is an understanding of the brutal character of the behavior of all human collectivities, and the power of self-interest and collective egoism in all inter-group relations. Failure to recognize the stubborn resistance of group egoism to all moral and inclusive social objectives inevitably involves them in unrealistic and confused political thought. They regard social conflict either as an impossible method of achieving morally approved ends or as a momentary expedient which a more perfect education or a purer religion will make unnecessary. They do not see that the limitations of the human imagination, the easy subservience of reason to prejudice and passion, and the consequent persistence of irrational egoism, particularly in group behavior, make social conflict an inevitability in human history, probably to its very end.⁶

The pathos of liberalism, in Niebuhr's estimation, was its inability to recognize the necessity of power and coercion in order to achieve any social cohesion and cooperation. Yet the exercise of power inescapably creates injustice and generates a perpetual state of warfare because those who organize power will always arrogate to themselves inordinate privilege. The intrinsically coercive nature of politics, therefore, seemed at best to render forceful methods morally neutral. "Politics will,"

Niebuhr asserted, "to the end of history, be an area where conscience and power meet, where the ethical and coercive factors of human life will interpenetrate and work out their tentative and uneasy compromises."⁷ To the Christian realist of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* the means/end dilemma of social ethics raised essentially pragmatic considerations and was viewed as a technical rather than ethical problem. Immediate effects would simply have to be weighed against ultimate ones, and no political action could be discounted as inherently immoral; in fact, "there is no moral value which may be regarded as absolute."⁸ Niebuhr's resolution of the means/end dilemma in ethics led him to a radically utilitarian recipe of breaking eggs for historical omelets:

... once we have made the fateful concession of ethics to politics, and accepted coercion as a necessary instrument of social cohesion, we can make no absolute distinctions between non-violent and violent types of coercion or between coercion used by governments and that which is used by revolutionaries. If such distinctions are made they must be justified in terms of the consequences in which they result. The real question is: what are the political possibilities of establishing justice through violence?⁹

If he held out the end of justice as the ethical norm of a particular political action, Niebuhr was content to separate the nature of the end from the quality of the means employed to secure it, and he even intimated that success was the principal determinant of the justified use of force. Also, given the tainted perspective of every self-interested individual and group, Niebuhr precluded any objective delineation of the goal of justice itself. If the glass through which all men gaze is thoroughly opaque, then one vision of justice is as distorted as another.

During the 1930's radical socialism provided the ethical standard of politics for Niebuhr. In 1935 the Fellowship of Socialist Christians, of which he was a member, founded *Radical Religion* as a journal devoted to uniting Christianity and Marxist social philosophy. Throughout the decade Niebuhr allied with the socialist opposition to the New Deal of John Dewey, Norman Thomas, and others who did not share his theological angle of vision. Critical of the New Deal for failing to bring about the basic structural changes which he believed modern capitalist economy required, Niebuhr regarded its inability to prevent the renewal of depression in 1937 as indicative of Roosevelt's unpragmatic, unsound centrism.¹⁰

Along with many American intellectuals in that decade, Niebuhr shared the infatuation with the "great experiment" of Communism, until the subsequent purges and finally the Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact of 1939 shattered their Icarian romance. As a second general war drew closer, Niebuhr forcefully argued the Christian case against pacifism but supported the American policy of nonintervention through 1940. By the time America became irrevocably engaged in the European conflagration Niebuhr had repudiated Marxism, but in the early years of the conflict he remained optimistic about chances for cooperating with Russia. At least until 1944 Niebuhr tended to regard Russia as a basically conservative national state with whom America had a common interest in a stable world order. Marxism no longer seemed a viable doctrine to him, and the international Communist party appeared as a radical, fractious obstacle to peace, but he felt that in the postwar world Europe would inevitably drift leftward and maintain closer ties with Russia than America.¹¹

Niebuhr's changing view of Marxism in

the forties led him to reassess the conception of human nature and society which *Moral Man and Immoral Society* had set forth in 1932. *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, published in 1944, marked a significant departure from his former pessimism and its radical implications. The neo-orthodox theological underpinning did not change,¹² but Niebuhr now appropriated the liberal theory of pluralism. The result was a new perception of America and a kind of political catechism for a younger generation of American liberals. *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* presaged the celebration of the great American middle way at home where a political economy of countervailing power was the correlate of a countervailing system of ethics. Pluralistic democratic politics, Niebuhr explained, excluded the possibility of fundamental social change and the use of force in the political struggle, yet the democratic pluralism he outlined for postwar American liberalism did not entail an equally consensual and pacific role for America in the world community.

Never an optimist, Niebuhr now feared that a too consistent pessimism led to political absolutism, though this pessimism itself would be inconsistent because the absolute ruler would be unchecked. The Pascalian view of human nature better suited a democratic society than either moral optimism or cynicism. The paradox of democracy was that "man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."¹³ The children of darkness are the moral cynics who recognize no law beyond their own self-will and interest, while the children of light "believe that self-interest should be brought under the discipline of a higher law."¹⁴ Democratic civilization has been built by the children of light, but they have been under attack

by the children of darkness who are shrewder than they:

The children of light have not been as wise as the children of darkness. . . . It must be understood that the children of light are foolish not merely because they underestimate the power of self-interest among the children of darkness. They underestimate this power among themselves.¹⁵

Modern secularism, in both its bourgeois and Marxist manifestations, had in its misguided optimism rejected the doctrine of Original Sin which Niebuhr held necessary for any adequate social and political theory, that is, the recognition that "there is no level of human moral or social achievement in which there is not some corruption of inordinate self-love."¹⁶ As a result, modern secular idealism had sought the source of conflict between individual and community in some form of external social organization rather than in human nature itself, forgetting that man has a will-to-power, as well as a capacity for selflessness, which sets him eternally in opposition to his fellows. The children of light must learn the wisdom of, but remain free from, the children of darkness.

Democratic society, Niebuhr maintained, was both the cause and effect of social and moral pluralism. Catholic natural law theory as well as secular rationalism and nihilism were inadequate approaches to the problem of diversity in the modern world. Only a proper religious humility and strong democratic institutions which challenge every pretension to truth and check every power with a countervailing power could mitigate the social conflict and preserve the toleration necessary in modern, pluralistic society.

The good society now emerged as the most tentative, well-balanced, neutral one. For Niebuhr and a generation of liberals

then coming of age the modern era had brought "the gradual ascendancy of politics over economics,"¹⁷ which implied for them both a description and prescription of liberal capitalism. Niebuhr, at any rate, no longer believed that basic structural change in the economy was required. The monetary and fiscal reforms of the New Deal welfare state inaugurated a new political society which would be "a more self-conscious and a more conscious society than economic society. Thus the eternal conflict between the privileged and the poor will be lifted to a new level of consciousness in the postwar period."¹⁸

In tracing the development of Niebuhr's thought in the late 1940's and early 1950's it is important to keep in mind Christian realism's divorce of ethics and politics. The essential pragmatism of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* remained intact in Niebuhr's philosophy; only the service to which it was put altered. Throughout 1945 Niebuhr proposed constructing the post-war international order upon a joint Russo-Anglo-Saxon world hegemony with Britain playing the role of broker in the great power triumvirate. Events in the late forties led Niebuhr from a view of America as playing a limited and supportive role in an independent Europe to a justification of American domination of Europe; indeed, at times he suggested that America's new imperial role was divinely ordained. He defended the creation of the hydrogen bomb and warned that the Western military alliance of NATO must be prepared to risk World War III in order to guard civilization against as demonical and fanatical a foe as Nazism had been. Niebuhr advocated a policy of universal containment in both political and military aspects and came to identify American national self-interest with the wider, collective interest of the world.¹⁹ Christian realism provided the impulse for action in a world in which the

ironic sense would better prepare the American mission "to save a vast uncommitted world, particularly in Asia, which lies between ourselves and communism, from being engulfed by this noxious creed."²⁰ American globalism had received the sanction of "reality," and realistic messianism was no less messianic for its contrite heart and sense of irony.

When the Fellowship of Socialist Christians, which published *Christianity and Society*, changed its name in May, 1948, to the Frontier Fellowship, Niebuhr explained that they had done so in order to dissociate themselves from socialist dogmatism. Socialism, Niebuhr and the Frontier Fellowship had become convinced, was too susceptible to Marxism in its Stalinist form, and this corruption was no longer thought to be accidental but rather an inevitable result of basic Marxist illusions. The Fellowship still subscribed to certain Marxist social insights and believed in the need for a critical attitude toward the institution of property, but the group committed itself to a more unideological approach to economic and political problems.²¹ It became obvious in the following years that for Niebuhr and the group of Christian liberals around him there was far more pragmatism than Christian socialism in their politics. Perhaps the supreme irony was that this pragmatic conception of American society and politics was coupled with such a doctrinaire conception of America's salvific role in the world. Out of a concern for America's global responsibilities Niebuhr wondered whether American world hegemony could be "a success" with such an inept business class dominant in American life. He concluded in the affirmative because he was persuaded business did not actually exercise formative control of U.S. policy. The plutocracy, Niebuhr contended, "is more influential in projecting its view of America in advertising slogans than

in determining political policy.”²² The liberal pragmatism of the New and Fair Deals had resolved the social question at home, and now we needed only to duplicate that pragmatism in the conduct of foreign affairs:

We have to move from case to case and from point to point in achieving justice while perserving freedom in a technical society. . . . There is therefore the bare possibility that the unplanned improvisations of our early New Deal may gradually grow into a purposeful pragmatism in America and world politics. In that case we might make a significant spiritual contribution to the cause of democracy and not to be consigned to the role of being merely the money lenders in a good cause.²³

Pragmatism has been esteemed for many reasons, but seldom have its devotees connected it with a “spiritual contribution” to civilization. The foreign policy advocated by Niebuhr in the 1950’s, however, was scarcely pragmatic, if by pragmatic we understand, among other things, a flexible, nondoctrinaire orientation. The pragmatic temperament is not always appreciative of the ironic sense, but pragmatic liberalism is replete with ironies and ambiguities.

For Niebuhr Christian realism came to mean a celebration of the common sense, American middle way. The New Deal formula of securing justice through the equilibration of power represented the “triumph of ‘common sense’ in American history.” Through the New and Fair Deals the liberal movement in America had wisely abandoned dogma for experience and had achieved a tolerable harmony of justice and liberty by balancing one power against another in society, thus avoiding the ideological wars and totalitarian horrors of Europe.²⁴ The good society was now the one which strove to maintain the greatest possible degree of equilibrium so that vari-

ous competing powers and interests and truths would check and neutralize one another. “It is because democracy,” wrote Niebuhr, “holds every public power under public scrutiny and challenges every pretension of wisdom and balances every force with a countervailing force, that some of the injustices which characterize traditional societies, and modern tyrannies, are prevented.”²⁵

Christian realism had replaced the idea of the good society with the gratifications of the goods society, and an older liberalism, which Niebuhr rejected in its individualistic form, was resurrected in the pragmatic mechanism of countervailing power. The eighteenth century “invisible hand” which had automatically and mysteriously generated the common good out of the private lusts of each now found its modern counterpart in the liberal capitalist theory of countervailing power, and the bourgeois marketplace theory of truth and morality was invested with the talisman of “realism.” Liberal theorists in America claimed that out of the unideological competition between organized interest groups would happily and fortuitously arise the common good of the whole society.²⁶ Democracy seemed to Niebuhr at mid-century an enlightened confluence of secular and Christian sources, though he granted that “democracy is not the sole or final criterion of the adequacy of a culture or truth of a religion.”²⁷

The new spirit of realism exalted the democratic “vital center” which, Niebuhr said, meant that in order for democracy to be a viable concern parties must not differ greatly and that a basic consensus must be shared nationally. Beyond the plutocratic welfare state, what this consensus might encompass was suggested by Niebuhr in his statement that “above all, there must be a reserve of loyalty to the nation—and, what may be more important,

to the principles of justice and freedom—which transcends the party conflict.”²⁸ The liberal nation-state, therefore, had come to embody the transcendent principles of justice and freedom. Niebuhr was now prepared to applaud trade unionism’s pragmatic disavowal of “the blueprints for utopia to which the sensitive spirits of a few decades ago were so much addicted.”²⁹ The Christian realist joined with secular liberals in equating the actualities of pragmatic, interest-group politics and welfare capitalism with the normative standards of social justice.

In the 1952 *Partisan Review* paean to America Niebuhr contributed a piece criticizing “adolescent embarrassment” at American culture, noting that we had pragmatically “‘muddled through’” to a high level of social justice and peace. Our peril was nevertheless great, he feared, because we had been reluctantly thrust into the leadership of an alliance against “a ruthless and intransigent foe, whose calumnies against us are so shockingly beside the point, that even the most critical and sophisticated patriot is tempted to become an uncritical one.”³⁰ The temptation of an uncritical devotion to “our country and our culture” is a measure of the distance Christian realism had traversed. Niebuhr spoke for a generation—a generation which came to revere him, George Kennan remarked not long ago, as “the father of us all”—of liberals come home in stating that the Christian faith can be expressed in terms of “political responsibilities” but cannot “be identified with some neat ideological position or political program.”³¹ Expressed in such a fashion, few would disagree with this proposition, yet in fact Niebuhr did identify Christian realism with an ideological position and political program. Moreover, the anti-ideological disenchantment of a generation of ex-radicals not only divorced them from what they regarded as

a specifically Christian politics but left them bereft of any rational standards with which to judge particular political responsibilities. Impressed with the moral ambiguity of every human action, Christian realism rendered normative what in essence it conceived of as an anti-normative system. The peculiar virtue of democracy for Niebuhr was that it rested on the truth that there was no truth and provided, at its best, for the countervailing neutralization of competing appetites. Consequently, the Christian responsibility in the social struggle “would not mean judging issues in terms of general principles but learning to understand the limit and ambiguity of every general principle and the taint of self-interest in every devotion to general principle.”³² One of the supreme ironies of Christian realism was that it should demand such an unambiguous defense of an organized system of such ambiguity.

Niebuhr often condemned the bourgeois principle that the commonweal is best served by each seeking his own advantage, but the moral vacuity of the Neutral Society derives from the marketplace relativism of Niebuhr’s essential bourgeois liberalism. Self-interest, he wrote concerning the economic life of liberal society, “must be allowed a certain free play for the additional reason that there is no one in society good or wise enough finally to determine how the individual’s capacities had best be used for the common good, or his labor rewarded, or the possibilities of useful toil, to which he may be prompted by his own initiative, be anticipated.”³³ During the 1950’s Niebuhr became apprehensive of the danger of a cultural and spiritual vacuum in modern, technocratic society, pointing out that Christianity differed from secularism in its insistence that security and happiness are not of this world. Christian realism, however, had given sanction to precisely this social and moral malaise by

its inability to pass rational judgment on the concrete ordering of things towards an intelligible end.

In the conduct of foreign affairs, however, Christian realism did not allow for a policy of restraint and pluralism. Niebuhr's defense of the great "middle way" at home and of its exportation abroad limited the world's choices in the cold war to only two. His denouncement of American churchmen for supposing that "motives of service" could ever replace the "profit motive" and his observation that socialism was in general retreat across Europe implied that the inevitable course of modern history had simply rendered certain alternatives irrelevant or untenable.³⁴ But clearly it was a particular assessment of the cold war and of "reality" itself which delimited the range of political possibility, or permissibility. Niebuhr no longer considered it possible for Europe to steer an independent, middle path between Russia and the United States because, despite modifications and differences, "socialism is still burdened by an excess baggage of Marxist dogma, and this baggage is frequently a hazard to the success of the free world."³⁵ Berlin socialists, for example, had the temerity to accuse the United States as well as Russia of imperialism. In the heat of the cold war Niebuhr frequently chastised dogmatists of both Left and Right for failing to remember that "empiricism is a basic requirement for democratic health."³⁶ Yet despite, or perhaps because of, his realistic empiricism, Niebuhr contended that the moral peril to America was only accidental. "Our moral perils," he proffered in *The Irony of American History*,

are not those of conscious malice or of the explicit lust for power. They are the perils which can be understood only if we realize the ironic tendency of virtues to turn into vices when too complacently replied upon; and of power to become

vexatious if the wisdom which directs it is trusted too confidently.³⁷

On the eve of the Second World War T. S. Eliot wrote:

That Liberalism may be a tendency toward something very different from itself, is a possibility in its nature. For it is something which tends to release energy rather than accumulate it, to relax, rather than to fortify. It is a movement not so much defined by its end, as by its starting point; away from, rather than towards, something definite.³⁸

In this manner, Eliot apprehended, "liberalism can prepare the way for that which is its own negation: the artificial, mechanised or brutalised control which is the desperate remedy for its chaos."³⁹ The endemic nature of liberalism described by Eliot here is, I submit, shared as well by one of its recent progeny, Christian realism.

Niebuhr's Christian realism, rooted in his neo-orthodox theology stressing the fallen nature of man and the ineradicable quality of his *amour propre*, remained constant from his earlier writing through the 1950's. The premise of Christian realism remained fixed, but it served in practice to justify both Niebuhr's former radical socialism and his latter pragmatic liberalism and cold war nationalism. The fact that Christian realism was able to accommodate, in the span of twenty years or so, diametrically opposed political positions leads one to doubt both its theoretical and practical value. Christian realism insists on the radical corruption of all human thought and action, whereupon, this perspective established, it is unable to specify the substance of any intelligible order. Reinhold Niebuhr leveled a mighty assault upon a simplistic bourgeois optimism, as expressed in the secular naturalism of John Dewey and the moral idealism of the Protestant social gospel movement, but the irony of

Christian realism lay in its fundamental affinity with the secular liberalism Niebuhr condemned. In the final issue Niebuhr's Protestant conception of the unmitigated and pervasive corruption of sin together with its attendant deracination of human reason eventuated in a political philosophy which differed little from liberal pragmatism.⁴⁰

The close affinity of Christian realism to liberalism is not an adventitious one. One writer has remarked that "Niebuhr's prophetic insight has been restricted by his acceptance of an essentially liberal structuring of his problem."⁴¹ This is so, he claims, because Niebuhr has retained from liberal Christianity the identification of sin with selfishness and because he operates with an individualistic view of groups and societies as individuals writ large. An important result of this for his political theory is that Niebuhr, therefore, regards the context in which man acts solely as a balance of power. I think this is an accurate assessment as far as it goes, but it does not quite reach the critical question of the nexus between ethics and politics. It is at the point where the anti-rational nominalism and individualism of the Protestant tradition meet with the post-Hobbesian equation of politics with power for the purpose of a measured release of appetite that the dilemma becomes explicit. The dilemma is intensified because while Protestant thinkers have tended to identify the whole of Christian ethics with the absolute precepts of the Sermon on the Mount, they have likewise customarily shared the modernist view of the relativity of human thought.

We are led, it appears then, to the position that politics is simply incompatible with Christian ethics or, to be sure, with the rational ethic of the classical tradition. There is surely, as Ferdinand Hermens has pointed out, a strong strain of Manichaeism in this interpretation of Christian

thought which sees the world as such a dark and devilish place and human reason as so polluted by its situation in time and place that we are left only with a purist "ethic of intention" or a cynical "ethic of responsibility."⁴² Unlike more thoroughgoing Manichaeism apostles of power politics, such as Hans Morgenthau, who posit a total breach between the noumenal world of morality and the phenomenal world of amoral politics, Niebuhr as a Christian theologian has at least endeavored to bridge the chasm. Nevertheless, the result has been substantially the same.

An admirer of Niebuhr has said that his great achievement has been to resolve the tension between the absolute ethic of the Sermon on the Mount, which like Niebuhr he equates with Christian ethics, and a relative social ethic by effectively separating morality and politics, which again like Niebuhr he equates with power.⁴³ This is not because politics is amoral, he hastens to add, but because politics cannot be judged by the impossible standard of the Sermon on the Mount or by a temporal social ethic which would necessarily be involved in sin. Christian ethics can and do prescribe goals for politics, but these humanly mediated goals will inevitably be immersed in sin and tainted with injustice. Because Christian morality is so transcendental and human reason is so vitiated, therefore, the relation between politics and ethics must always remain incommensurable. Since no one can objectively say what is true and just, democracy is the best form of government, especially as it becomes more egalitarian. One readily recalls Niebuhr's famous paradox that democracy is possible because men are sufficiently good and necessary because they are so bad.

It has been fairly observed that American Protestant political theory has been at a loss to offer any rational analysis of

human nature and the proper ordering of society due to its basic fidelity to the "Protestant principle" itself, that is, the principle of radical criticism which asserts the inextinguishable sinfulness of man and judges all human ideas and forms to have at best only relative value.⁴⁴ Luther was animated to slay the whore, Reason, "which is the fountain and headspring of all mischiefs."⁴⁵ The anti-rationalism of Lutheran theology was combined also in Luther's mind with an anti-institutional spirit in both the religious and political realms with the result that he made "the Christian ethic appear irrelevant to the logic of the political order."⁴⁶ Considered in this light, Christian realism's pragmatic sundering of moral man and immoral society shares in the judgment which Sheldon Wolin has made of Luther's political theory: "The Christian ethic might well be applicable at the intimate, personal level, and yet be quite irrelevant for the relationships

created by a complicated political order."⁴⁷

By its very nature Protestant political theory appears able only to arrive at the perfectionism of the progressive temperament or the pragmatism of Christian realism. Niebuhr's fundamental pragmatism is extolled in a recent study whose author warmly embraces Niebuhr's lifelong concern for "the social relevance of religion," religion, that is, in its "demythologized" form.⁴⁸ The Ancients understood the indissoluble connection between the good order of individual souls and the proper order of the community and believed that if the social body was hopelessly corrupt, then at least men ought still to strive for the perfection of their souls. At this point in history not only does the conception of a well-ordered community seem to be a mere phantasm, but the fate of individual souls is sealed as well by demythologized, socially relevant religion.

⁴⁴Morton White, *Social Thought in America: The Revolt against Formalism* (2nd ed. rev.; Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), p. x.

⁴⁵Sidney Hook, "The New Failure of Nerve," *Partisan Review*, X (January-February, 1943), 16 and 9.

⁴⁶Reinhold Niebuhr, *Man's Nature and His Communities: Essays on the Dynamics and Enigmas of Man's Personal and Social Existence* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), p. 23.

⁴⁷For an excellent discussion of secular, liberal thought the reader might wish to consult White, *Social Thought in America*. Accounts of religious liberalism and the social gospel movement may be found in Henry F. May, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (2nd ed. rev.; New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967); and Donald B. Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism: 1919-1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960).

⁴⁸Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Blindness of Liberalism," *Radical Religion*, I (Autumn, 1936), 4-5. Hereafter this journal will be cited as *R. R.*

⁴⁹Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), p. xx.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁵²*Ibid.*, pp. 179-80.

⁵³Reinhold Niebuhr, "Taxation and Equality," *R. R.*, I (Spring, 1936), 4-5. See also "The Administration and the Depression," *R. R.*, III (Winter, 1937), 7-8; and "Roosevelt's Merry-Go-Round," *R. R.*, III (Spring, 1938), 4.

⁵⁴For a fuller discussion of Niebuhr's radicalism in the 1930's and of his changing attitudes towards Russia and America in World War II see John W. Coffey, "Realist Social Thought in America: Reinhold Niebuhr and George F. Kennan," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1970), pp. 18-40.

⁵⁵It has not been my purpose in this paper to examine, except by way of reference, in depth the neo-orthodox theology of Niebuhr. This has been done elsewhere and at length. There are a number of studies of Niebuhr's theology and general social thought, the best of which is Gordon Harland, *The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960). Also, a valuable collection of critical essays by distinguished authors is to be found in Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall, eds., *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1961). The point I wish to make here is that the neo-orthodox theology which underlay Niebuhr's whole realist

ethical and social system and which he elaborately sets forth in the magisterial two-volume *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964) readily comports both his earlier radical socialism and his later pragmatic liberalism. The realist theology does not change; its practical implications do.

¹³Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), p. xiii.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁷Reinhold Niebuhr, "Politics and Economics," *Christianity and Society*, VII (Autumn, 1942), 7. Hereafter this journal will be cited as *C. and S.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁹A more detailed analysis of the genesis of Niebuhr's liberalism in the postwar years may be found in Coffey, "Realist Social Thought in America," pp. 45-91. My purpose is not to offer an analysis of the cold war and the relative merit or wisdom of specific policies but rather to attempt to show a continuity in the mode of Niebuhr's thinking.

²⁰Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 16.

²¹See Reinhold Niebuhr, "Frontier Fellowship," *C. and S.*, XIII (Autumn, 1948), 3; and "The Second Focus of the Fellowship," *C. and S.*, XV (Winter, 1949-50), 19-22.

²²Reinhold Niebuhr, "Plutocracy and World Responsibilities," *C. and S.*, XIV (Autumn, 1949), 7.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁴See *The Irony of American History*, pp. 89-108; and *The Self and the Dramas of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), pp. 200-201. See also Reinhold Niebuhr, "Halfway to What?" *The Nation*, January 14, 1950, pp. 26-28; "We Need an Edmund Burke," *C. and S.*, XVI (Summer, 1951), 6-8; and "Coercion, Self-Interest, and Love," *The Organizational Revolution: A Study in the Ethics of Economic Organization*, ed. Kenneth E. Boulding (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), p. 228-44.

²⁵Reinhold Niebuhr, "Democracy, Secularism, and Christianity," *Christianity and Crisis*, March 2, 1953, p. 20.

²⁶The limits of the present study prevent me from giving an extended discussion of liberal pluralist theory. The literature of and on this subject is enormous, but for a start the interested reader will find several of the more seminal statements of this theory in the following works: John Kenneth Galbraith, *American Capitalism: The Concept of Countervailing Power* (Sentry

ed.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1956); Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Sentry ed.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1962); Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideals in the Fifties* (rev. ed.; New York: The Free Press, 1965); Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1963).

²⁷Niebuhr, "Democracy, Secularism, and Christianity," p. 24.

²⁸Reinhold Niebuhr, "Democracy and the Party Spirit," *The New Leader*, March 15, 1954, p. 4.

²⁹Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Meaning of Labor Unity," *The New Leader*, March 28, 1955, p. 9; see also "The CIO-AFL Merger and the Labor Movement," *C. and S.*, XX (Spring, 1955), 5-6.

³⁰Reinhold Niebuhr, "Our Country and Our Culture: A Symposium," *Partisan Review*, XVII (Summer, 1952), 3.

³¹Reinhold Niebuhr, "Our Faith and Concrete Political Decisions," *C. and S.*, XVII (Summer, 1952), 3.

³²Reinhold Niebuhr, "Christian Faith and Social Action," in *Christian Faith and Social Action*, ed. John A. Hutchinson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 238.

³³Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Christian Faith and the Economic Life of Liberal Society," in *Goals of Economic Life*, ed. A. Dudley Ward (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), p. 446.

³⁴See Reinhold Niebuhr, "Communism and the Clergy," *The Christian Century*, August 19, 1953, pp. 936-37; and "The Fate of European Socialism," *The New Leader*, June 20, 1955, pp. 6-8.

³⁵Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Anomaly of European Socialism," *The Yale Review*, XLII (December, 1952), 161.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 166.

³⁷Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, p. 133.

³⁸T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture: The Idea of a Christian Society and Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1949), p. 12.

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰See Wilson Carey McWilliams, "Reinhold Niebuhr: New Orthodoxy for an Old Liberalism," *American Political Science Review*, LVI (December, 1962), pp. 874-85. Mr. McWilliams maintains, as I have, that "Niebuhr's basic political ideas are essentially the same as those of the liberals he seeks to criticize" (p. 874). Specifically, he argues that Niebuhr shares the liberal doctrines of human perfectibility, the valuation of freedom as the *summum bonum* of society, the contract theory of the state, and the idea of historical progress. While it is an astute and cogent analysis, I hold some serious reservations about it, particularly McWilliams' suggestion that Niebuhr's

"theory contains an implicit 'natural law' or 'natural right'" (p. 877) which, of course, are not the same thing anyway and his belief that "For Niebuhr the free man is in essence the good man; virtue follows automatically from freedom. Man's imperfections arise from his involvement in nature—an inevitable involvement, to be sure, but one rooted in lack of power and not of virtue in the classical sense" (p. 885). Quite the contrary, the free man is not the good man in Niebuhr's Lutheran conception of human nature and sin. McWilliams misinterprets, I think, Niebuhr's realism as a rational doctrine concerning man's situation in physical nature, thereby ignoring entirely the theological heart of Christian realism. It is the centrality of sin in Niebuhr's neo-orthodox theology which allows the curious conjunction of Christian realism and secular liberalism and their common commitment to a contentless freedom as the prerequisite for the exertion of mastery in the world and the enlightened pursuit of individual appetite. This is perhaps, among other things, the bond felt by those Morton White calls "atheists for Niebuhr." It may be replied that Niebuhr makes love the ultimate ethical norm, but I am persuaded his use of this norm is either practically irrelevant or only compounds man's sinfulness in a sinful world.

"Dan Rhoades, 'The Prophetic Insight and Theoretical-Analytical Inadequacy of 'Christian Realism,'" *Ethics*, LXXV (October, 1964), p. 1. The substance and language of Rhoades' discussion reveal his fondness for the social science approach to politics. He believes that neither individualism, which he erroneously equates with any political theory based on a conception of human nature, nor a sound doctrine of sin can

give us concrete political answers, which, of course, they are not intended to do, at least immediately. Hence, according to Mr. Rhoades, we would do better to follow the example of the social sciences which take man as an actor "within various structural fields" and pay more attention to methodology and empirical analysis. Concerning the modernist perversion of science through an absorption in methodology see Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), especially pp. 1-26. For a fuller treatment of Niebuhr's relation to liberal Protestant theology see Edward D. O'Connor, C.S.C., "The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr," *Review of Politics*, XXIII (April, 1961), pp. 172-202.

"Ferdinand A. Hermens, "Ethics, Politics, and Power: Christian Realism and Manichaeism," *Ethics*, LXVIII (July, 1958), pp. 246-59.

"Ronald F. Howell, "Political Philosophy on a Theological Foundation: An Expository Analysis of the Political Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr," *Ethics*, LXIII (January, 1953), pp. 79-99.

"Douglas Sturm, "A Critique of American Protestant Social and Political Thought," *Journal of Politics*, XXVI (November, 1964), pp. 896-913.

"Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* in *Martin Luther: Selections From His Writings*, ed. by John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), p. 128.

"Sheldon S. Wolin, "Politics and Religion: Luther's Simplistic Imperative," *American Political Science Review*, L (March, 1956), p. 40.

"*Ibid.*, p. 41.

"See Ronald H. Stone, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972).

The Traveler to Himself

ROBERT DRAKE

FROM MY EARLIEST childhood years, I wanted always to travel. Unlike my parents, who would not have been unduly disturbed if you had told them they could never leave the county again, or other relatives and friends, who would have said, well, all right, they would happily stay home if only they could get to Memphis (fifty miles away and our most glamorous lodestone) from time to time, I was always eager to see what lay on the other side of the hill, to find out how matters were ordered elsewhere, to learn—above all, to move.

I'm not sure why I was then and still am so constituted. Did I regard my own small-town environment as restrictive and inhibiting—like so many bright young men in fiction and film? Did I feel so *different* there that I found it all alien and oppressive to my sensitive spirit? No, I don't think there was ever much of either Stephen Dedalus or Eugene Gant in my make-up, though surely I must have shared their thirst for knowledge, their quest for experience. (And travel represents both a kind of thirst and also a quite literal quest.)

Perhaps it was just that, while accepting my environment for all it was, I felt I had to have something else to compare it with; I wouldn't be altogether content with it or

even sure of it until I knew what the other possibilities were. Because never, in any of my travel fantasies, did I imagine myself *leaving* home: I was only going away for a while, to return, presumably, wiser, more perceptive about the big wide world, which then—and still does for me—revolve around the centrality of home.

Admittedly, there may have been some of the traditional young man's rebellion in this: my parents seemed, perversely, almost proud of never having traveled and not really wanting to, and I thought their horizons somewhat restricted accordingly. That wasn't going to happen to me. And I was convinced also that, as wonderful as Memphis was, there were other, even greater wonders elsewhere. And I had to see them, experience them for myself—but always with a view to bringing at least some portion of them back home.

Were there any particular influences that helped to shape and form such attitudes on my part? Well, nothing in particular and yet everything in general, I should say. Yes, I too saw the *National Geographic* in the dentist's office; and I heard various cousins and acquaintances "tell their trips." One cousin, in particular, delighted me with her trips to the Southwest (for her