

Reinhold Niebuhr's Visions of America: the 1920s and 1930s

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PREFACE

The depth and scope of the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) on the intellectual community in the United States has been surpassed by none. He is remembered by politicians and political theorists as a tough-minded, practical strategist and an insightful, theoretical interpreter of politics. Among philosophers, he is known as a profound interpreter of human history with the uncommon ability to discern the “signs of the times.”¹ For theologians, he is a brilliant apologist of Christian faith who is able to demonstrate most effectively that Christianity alone can do justice to the mysterious heights and depths of the human spirit.

Those interpretations of Reinhold Niebuhr are undoubtedly correct. He was the great political theorist whom George Kennan called the “father of us all.”² His understanding of history as an ambiguous mixture of human freedom and destructiveness without falling into absolute relativism and moral cynicism is a permanent contribution to the field of philosophy. Along with Paul Tillich, he has remained a towering figure in 20th century American Protestantism. And yet, the fact of

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the matter is that Niebuhr defies our efforts to categorize him into any kind of preconceived intellectual mold. That is the spiritual and intellectual grandeur of Reinhold Niebuhr. It invites and, indeed, demands us to continue examining his thought from angles other than those traditionally accorded to him.

This paper seeks to uncover what we deem to be one significant aspect of Niebuhr that has not hitherto received sufficient scholarly attention: Reinhold Niebuhr as an interpreter of American national behavior. That this was one of his primary concerns from his days as a fledgling pastor in Detroit is testified by the fact that Abraham Lincoln was his lifetime “hero in religion and in state craft.”³ What Niebuhr learned from the 16th President of the United States was a twofold perspective concerning American destiny: (1) America is divinely ordained with unique responsibility; and (2) national responsibility is not to be equated with national virtue.⁴

It was this theological and moral perspective that constantly provided the controlling framework, as it were, of Niebuhr’s interpretation of America as a nation. What distinguished Reinhold Niebuhr as an interpreter of American national behavior was precisely this: he always looked at America in the light of its spiritual reality. The title of his book, *Pious and Secular America* (1958), amply expresses this side of Niebuhr. Put differently, his framework of interpretation was rooted in his own vision of what America ought to be.

This statement seems to contradict the common assumption that Niebuhr’s political theory was singularly lacking in a vision of any kind.⁵ There is no denying that Niebuhr was not particularly interested in making the content of his vision clear in all of his writings. In fact, he became increasingly reticent about speaking of vision as his thought progressed to a more mature stage. These observations notwithstanding, it is our contention that Niebuhr generated his unique visions of America as he grew from a young liberal pastor to an influential public theologian and that clarifying them in their own historical context is essential to understanding his interpretation of American national behavior. The present paper seeks to prove this point by tracing the changing processes of his various visions which appeared in different stages of his intellectual career and by uncovering what role and function they played in his attempt to understand the place of America in human history.

It is to be pointed out, finally, that Niebuhr’s visions of America

were determined to a large extent by concrete historical events in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly by his struggle with liberalism, Marxism, and fascism in those eventful eras. Having been firmly established by the end of the 1930s, his most mature vision of America continued to provide the controlling principle of his thought for the rest of his active intellectual career. Hence the title of this paper: Reinhold Niebuhr's Visions of America: the 1920s and 1930s.

I

Niebuhr's visions of America in the 1920s were born in response to the social and political realities in Detroit where he spent thirteen years (1915-1928) as the young and energetic pastor of a small German-American church. The destructive and dehumanizing effects of modern industrialism demonstrated in the vast automobile industry of Henry Ford provided the immediate social context in which he carried on his pastoral ministry. The young Niebuhr's direct knowledge of the wretched working conditions of the city's industrial workers soon undermined the youthful optimism he had been espousing since his graduation from Yale Divinity School. In 1956 he recalled those Detroit days as follows:

During my pastorate of thirteen years in the city, Detroit was to expand from a half to a million and a half population. The resulting facts determined my development more than any books which I may have read.⁶

What troubled Niebuhr more than anything else was, on the one hand, the self-deceiving claim of Henry Ford to be the benevolent and magnanimous employer of the city's thousands of workers and, on the other, the moral insensitivity of the American general public in regarding him as a unique embodiment of the American dream. For Niebuhr, American society had become obsessed with possession and greed. Particularly singled out for his criticism was the American middle class.

As he mulled over the self-destructive direction in which America was drifting, Niebuhr could not help but realize that he himself had been guilty of the very moral complacency for which he had been criticizing American society. What brought him to this searching self-criticism was the behavior of the victorious nations in the aftermath of the Versailles Conference. Before and during the War, he had willingly supported President Wilson's war effort to "make the world safe for

democracy” only to realize that the victors were just as self-serving, hypocritical, and vengeful as defeated Germany. Indeed, “the moral pretensions of the heroes were bogus.”⁷ What was sorely needed in America, realized Niebuhr, was a more sober and critical self-knowledge.

It was in his struggle to meet this difficult challenge that Niebuhr revealed his propensity to interpret American national behavior in the light of its spiritual reality. Having given up on the American general public, he turned to American churches as agents of transformation. What he saw in them was disappointing, to say the least.

In my parish duties I found that the simple idealism into which the classical faith had evaporated was as irrelevant to the crises of personal life as it was to the complex social issues of an industrial city.⁸

American churches, too, had been totally oblivious to the predatory nature of industrial civilization. They equated scientific progress with moral progress. They glibly proclaimed the shallow dogma that good would triumph over evil in the constant development of history, even though there was not a single bit of evidence to prove it. Not only the secular public but ecclesiastic communities were incapable of discerning the meaning of America in human history. Somewhat sweepingly, Niebuhr called the easy optimism of the American middle class “liberalism.”

What had become clear to Niebuhr by the beginning of the 1920s was this: America was sick; it was in need of transformation. What was the nature of the sickness? American Christians had “never developed any real fervor for the advanced ethical positions of Jesus.”⁹ The nature of the American sickness was the lack of moral passion among American Christians to live up to Christian ideals. Having identified the root cause of the problem in the area of morality, Niebuhr went on to point out the ways to correct it. Transforming America meant overcoming “the vain illusion of liberalism that one could share the religion of Jesus without cross-bearing.”¹⁰ The easy optimism of liberalism had to be replaced by Christian idealism imbued with religious passion and moral energy.

Despite his rejection of easy optimism, Niebuhr’s early analysis of America strongly reflected the prevailing ethos of liberalism. He did not question the fundamental goodness of the individual and of American society. America was sick, it was true, but it was by no

means hopeless. It had enough residual health to pull itself up by its own bootstraps.

In his diary of 1926, Niebuhr recorded an episode that clearly revealed his thinking in this regard. In an animated discussion on the Sermon on the Mount in the "Young Men's Class" of his church, the members' attention was focused on the difficulty of applying Jesus' ethic to everyday life. One member commented that that "would put a business man out of business in no time." Another responded: "Maybe it would work if we tried it hard enough." On their exchange Niebuhr concluded: "That may be the answer to the whole question."¹¹

To be sure, occasionally he became somewhat skeptical of bourgeois churches' ability to develop the kind of moral courage and religious passion necessary for the challenge. And yet, the prophetic leadership of Bishop Charles D. Williams of the Episcopal Church, Bishop Francis J. McConnell of the Methodist Church, and St. Louis Episcopal Dean William Scarlett was enough to keep his Christian idealism intact. His first major book, *Does Civilization Need Religion?* (1927),¹² revealed his fervent trust in Christian idealism in spite of mounting injustice in America in the latter part of the 1920s.

In a nutshell, the book was a call for replacing secular optimism with Christian idealism. By invoking the authority of Albert Schweitzer and Alfred North Whitehead, Niebuhr asserted that Christianity alone could provide the essential basis for a just society: the sacred worth of the individual and the meaningfulness of the universe in spite of its contingent elements. America could be transformed by disciplined and tough-minded Christians who knew "how to restrain their expansive desires for the sake of social peace" (p. 232). In short, what America needed was nothing less than a "new asceticism" and "spiritualized technicians" (p. 228). All in all, Niebuhr's understanding of America in the Detroit days can be summarized thus: it was a nation readily redeemable by self-sacrifice and hard work.

II

However, it became increasingly clear to Niebuhr as years went by that replacing bourgeois optimism with the gospel of self-sacrifice and rigorous individual morality provided no viable solutions for industrial society. "Since the struggle between those who have and those who

have not is a never-ending one, society will always be, in a sense, a battle ground.”¹³ Christian idealism, in short, would be utterly powerless to solve the problem of human self-interests. Niebuhr’s understanding of the complexities of human society led him to the following insight:

Shall the Biblical injunction to servants that they be obedient to their masters “not only to the good and gentle but also to the forward” apply to political tyrannies? Obviously an attitude which represents a high spiritual achievement in the individual instance has its limitations when raised to a general social policy.¹⁴

In other words, the ethic of Jesus was workable only in the personal realm of human life and was not relevant to the realm of the collective. This new discovery, of course, contradicted the basic assertion of his Christian idealism. And yet, nowhere in *Does Civilization Need Religion?* did he wrestle with this newly emerging enigma. What Niebuhr needed, as the end of the 1920s was rapidly approaching, was a more realistic way of dealing with what the ethic of Jesus was constitutionally unable to handle, the brutal side of industrial society as a “battleground.”

What made American society cruel and inhuman? By the latter part of the 1920s, Niebuhr had become confident in answering this question. It was capitalism, the economic system rooted in a one-sided faith in the innate goodness of human self-interest. Its aversion to any controls on economic activities came from its dogma that the world would remain harmonious and just as long as human beings were allowed to pursue their self-interests freely. With this understanding, Niebuhr called capitalism “laissez-faire economy.”

Niebuhr insisted that such a glorification of human self-interest created the fundamental cause of social injustice: the disproportion of economic power. The relationship between Henry Ford and his employees was a case in point. The fact that the automobile tycoon was enjoying his unlimited wealth at the time when his workers were languishing in poverty could be explained only in terms of a radical imbalance in economic power. Capitalism was a boon to the privileged and bad news for the poor. Niebuhr therefore concluded that it had to be replaced with socialism; private ownership had to give way to social ownership. With this conviction, he became a member of the Socialist Party in 1929. He had been on the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in New York City for barely a year.

Niebuhr's commitment to the causes of socialism is attested by the fact that in 1930 he ran for the State Senate ticket as a Socialist candidate from the city's Nineteenth District. Though he was soundly defeated, he became a man to be watched even in the area of practical politics. His tireless support for socialism continued through numerous articles written mainly for *The Christian Century*, a theological magazine for pastors and lay Christians.

He maintained that the primary purpose of socialism was the establishment of an egalitarian society. The only way to realize the socialistic ideal was by "the continued abridgment, qualification and destruction of absolute property rights."¹⁵ In concrete terms, he advocated heavier inheritance taxes, increased income taxes, and extensive public welfare assistance.

In 1932 Niebuhr ran again for public office on the Socialist ticket, this time for Congress. Norman Thomas was the perennial presidential candidate of the Socialist Party. The outcome was devastating to the Socialists. Niebuhr received only 4.4 percent of the Congressional vote and Thomas, a meager 2.2 percent.¹⁶ For Niebuhr, the defeat of the Socialist Party was not to be attributed to its irrelevancy for America. The fault lay in the American public. That was exactly what he meant when he commented anonymously in *World Tomorrow*, a magazine for Christian socialists: "The American people seem to be very inert in the face of the sufferings to which they are being subjected."¹⁷ What America needed was clear: a social theory suitable for the revolutionary task of the proletariat. In his second major book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932),¹⁸ Niebuhr declared Marxism to be the truest and most adequate social theory that could meet the awesome challenge. What Niebuhr found most refreshing in Marxism was its insistence that both reason and religion were deeply tainted with egoism, a position that was totally foreign to liberalism. "The force of egoistic impulse is much more powerful than any but the most astute psychological analysts and the most rigorous devotees of introspection realize" (p. 40). The greatest contribution of Marxism, for Niebuhr, lay in its insight that the egoistic impulse expressed itself most dynamically in the economy. "The economic interest of the dominant social classes" always supported "their special privileges in society" (p. xiv). Therefore, the disproportion of economic power in society was the real root of social injustice (p. 163). In short, Marxism clarified for Niebuhr what liberalism could not: special privileges made all

human beings dishonest.

Reason might qualify the egoistic impulse to a certain extent, but it would never be able to overcome it. Human beings used reason to justify their own self-interests just as slave owners had justified slavery during the Civil War with sophisticated theological and sociological arguments. "Reason may not only justify egoism prematurely but actually give it a force which it does not possess in non-rational nature" (p. 41). The same could be said of religion. Religion might not only relativize the claims of groups and nations but also lead to quietistic absorption or ascetic withdrawal from the world. It might absolutize relative claims of human communities just as provincial nationalism and patriotic jingoism had done.

Reason and religion were particularly dangerous in that they could be used by the privileged to claim that their privileges were good for the whole or were just payments for their virtues. "The moral attitudes of dominant and privileged groups are characterised by universal self-deception and hypocrisy" (p. 117). This cynicism of Marxism, insisted Niebuhr, was essential for keeping the predatory character of industrial civilization in check. It was in this context that Niebuhr delineated the proposition that stayed with him even after becoming "one of the sharpest critics of Communism."¹⁹ He summarized that proposition in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* as follows: "From the perspective of society the highest moral ideal is justice. From the perspective of the individual the highest ideal is unselfishness" (p. 257). By justice, he meant a systematic check on exploitation by equalizing economic power and counterbalancing social privileges. Of course, perfect equality would be impossible in history. Still, the principle of equality would serve as the ideal to which every human society would strive for its absolute goal (p. 235).

How could we go about establishing equal justice in view of the fact that no group would relinquish its power voluntarily without being forced to do so? Again Marxism provided the answer: coercion. Every society, in order to be just, would have to provide the most responsible and judicious ways in which coercion was deployed for an equal distribution of power in that society. "The elimination of coercion is a futile ideal but . . . the rational use of coercion is a possible achievement which may save society" (p. 235).

If coercion was an essential ingredient of a just society, did Niebuhr go as far as to advocate violent revolution in America? In *Moral Man*

and Immoral Society, he was equivocal on this issue. He certainly did not advise blacks to engage in violence. Such means of non-violent protest as strikes and economic sanctions were much more viable for minorities in America (p. 252). The issue of violence or non-violence would have to be decided pragmatically "in the light of circumstances" (p. 252). All he was ready to say was: "Violence can . . . not be ruled out on apriori grounds" (p. 172).

Who would be the agents of revolution? The middle class was totally inert. Farmers were too individualistic and culturally conservative. Only the working class was morally and ethically qualified to be the harbinger of social transformation. Having been oppressed by capitalism, its members alone deserved to be outraged by injustice. Only they had firsthand knowledge of the brutalities of their society. In the beginning of the 1930s, Niebuhr found the proletariat to be the only revolutionary force in America. At the time he was writing his second major book, Niebuhr's hope for America was renewed. But this time, his hope was rooted not in the "new asceticism" of Christian idealism but in Marxism, that would eventually transform all of Europe.

Varying political and economic circumstances may qualify socialistic theory in different nations and in different epochs; but it would be impossible to deny that socialism, more or less Marxian, is the political creed of the industrial worker of Western civilization. (p. 144)

And yet, Niebuhr was not a doctrinaire Marxist even in this period. He was critical of the intolerance and spirit of vindictiveness rampant among Marxists. They were perfectly clear about the self-interest of bourgeois culture; unfortunately, they simply would not recognize the same egoism in themselves. They claimed to be the perfect embodiments of impartiality. Niebuhr called this unwillingness on the part of Marxists to admit their own limitations "the Marxist utopianism" (p. 192).

It is clear, then, that Niebuhr did not expect a perfect society, even when he was most strongly inclined to Marxism. Justice would remain an approximation at best, never realized in actual history (p. 22). Put more concretely, "an uneasy balance of power would seem to become the highest goal to which society could aspire" (p. 232). Our question at this juncture is how Niebuhr understood the relationship between the ideal of the individual (unselfishness) and that of the collective (equal justice). A totally unselfish person would be singularly incapable of tak-

ing coercive measures essential for social justice. Put differently, how could an individual live in a society as a responsible citizen if the ideals of individual and society were not harmonious with each other? At the time of writing *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr had not found the answer. The reader had to be satisfied with Niebuhr's frank admission of dualism. "These two moral perspectives are not mutually exclusive and the contradiction between them is not absolute. But neither are they easily harmonized" (p. 257).

III

We can surmise that Niebuhr's concern with the knotty problem of the dualism between individual morality and social justice deepened considerably in a theological debate with his younger brother, H. Richard Niebuhr, over the issue of Christian response to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. The debate began with Richard's article, "The Grace of Doing Nothing,"²⁰ which appeared in *The Christian Century* on March 23, 1932. In denying vehemently economic sanctions against Japan as a possible "Christian" response, Richard pointed out a radically different way in which Christians should act as responsible citizens. He maintained that American Christians should realize that their nation's sanctions against Japan were, to a large extent, motivated by national interests. And yet, America was pretending to be acting for the welfare of the entire world. Christians were to repent of this national hypocrisy by divorcing themselves from the program of nationalism and capitalism. Instead, they were to prepare themselves for the future by creating the conditions under which reconciliation would be possible. Richard insisted that this kind of "inactivity" was immensely more productive than the "righteous indignation" of a good many Christians.

To Reinhold, Richard's theological position was the worst kind of religious irresponsibility and he said so in "Must We Do Nothing?" published in the same magazine the following week. The essential point of his critique was that his brother did not understand what Marxism had clarified for Reinhold: the norm of society was justice, not love. "We cannot imagine [a society] in which there is no coercion at all." To engage in repentance of American sin in the face of the Japanese aggression without taking some kind of coercive measures to stop it was to commit a sin of irresponsibility. Reinhold summarized his point as

follows:

. . . we must try to dissuade Japan from her military venture, but must use coercion to frustrate her designs if necessary, must reduce coercion to a minimum and prevent it from issuing in violence, must engage in constant self-analysis in order to reduce the moral conceit of Japan's critics and judges to a minimum, and must try in every social situation to maximise the ethical forces and yet not sacrifice the possibility of achieving an ethical goal because we are afraid to use any but purely ethical means.²¹

So, for Niebuhr, justice was the highest norm of human society, and coercion was its instrument. The responsibility of the individual was to keep coercion from degenerating into exploitation. If this point was appropriated, he was sure, America should be able to make an important contribution even to world peace. But, again, that depended entirely on Marxism taking root in American cultural soil.

Although Niebuhr was calling himself a "Christian Marxist" in 1934,²² he had grown skeptical about the possibility of Marxism gaining influence among Americans in the foreseeable future. In the preface of his third major work, *Reflections on the End of an Era*,²³ he bluntly stated that he was "without much hope that (the book) will elicit any general concurrence" (pp. ix-x). The privileged would not renounce their privileges without being forced to do so. This recalcitrance on the part of the privileged would make fascism inevitable, for, after all, fascism in industrial civilization was really the capitalists' frantic attempt to avoid or postpone the end of capitalism. With the emerging movement of Hitler in mind, Niebuhr warned that "the end of capitalism will be bloody rather than peaceful" (p. 59).

This did not mean that the ultimate victory of the proletariat was in doubt. Niebuhr was still as convinced as he had been in *Moral Man* that the proletariat alone were the bearers of the social ideal. They might suffer many defeats before their final triumph, but they had moral and physical advantages. Their ideals concerning equality of wealth and privileges "transcend the interests of any class" (p. 143). Also, in going beyond the point he had made in the previous book, he argued that they were simply physically tough in the face of difficulties and in "real moments" (p. 144). Niebuhr's conclusion was unwavering: "The future belongs to the worker" (p. 146).

And yet, although blessed with moral and physical advantages, the proletariat, in Niebuhr's argument, was also tainted with egoism. His criticism of Marxism was basically the same in substance as it has been

in *Moral Man*, but this time it had more vigor and depth. His strongest criticism fell on the proletariat's spirit of vengeance. Niebuhr believed that this was caused by the proletarian insistence that its particular sufferings were identical with universal suffering. Such a one-sided claim for universalism lay at the core of proletarian self-righteousness: those who were oppressed by the economic system of capitalism were, by definition, innocent of any evil in society, and the privileged were not qualified to claim any form of good at all (pp. 168–172). Herein lay the basis of the proletarian illusion that “elimination of the foe will guarantee future justice” (p. 169).

Despite the above criticism of Marxism, Niebuhr nevertheless believed, as we have seen, that the future belonged to the proletariat. The question was whether there existed in America groups of workers strong and vibrant enough to revolutionize the nation. Niebuhr could not find any in 1934. This was the most basic source of his skepticism concerning America in the mid-1930s.

In America the workers are still without any real organ or center of cohesion. They are merely resentful and dissatisfied individuals and have not risen to the status of a self-conscious and coherent group. (p. 160)

Niebuhr's pessimism was reflected in his position that America had lost the ability to provide leadership in stabilizing the international conflict in Europe. In “Shall We Seek World Peace or the Peace of America?”²⁴ written for *World Tomorrow*, he predicted that an international war was imminent but that there was very little that America could do to prevent it. What needed doing should be done by the European powers, and not by the United States of America. Niebuhr was afraid that America lacked the political maturity for international leadership. Then, too, he was convinced that the collapse of capitalism was “the logic of history” and the future victory of Marxism over fascism was “inevitable.”

This rigid Marxist determinism blinded Niebuhr to the creative potential of the New Deal, the economic recovery program initiated by Roosevelt to cope with the Great Depression. From Niebuhr's perspective that Marxism was the only adequate social theory for America, the New Deal looked totally incoherent and aimless. It was too mild and lukewarm to correct the “constitutional defects” of American society.²⁵ Even as late as 1939, his view on the New Deal was patronizing, to say the least. “We have discovered a medicine . . . which wards off

dissolution without giving the patient health.’’²⁶

So, in spite of the gloomy reality that lay before him, or because of it, Niebuhr remained a hopeful Marxist with regard to America’s ultimate future. His hope lay in the inevitable victory of the oppressed over the privileged, the substitution of Marxist socialism for capitalism. And yet, there was one question that was nagging him. Marxism as a social theory did not solve the problem of egoism. The proletariat absolutized the relative as much as the privileged did. Human selfishness would remain a problem even in an egalitarian Marxist society. What kind of justice could one expect in the ultimate future? Niebuhr tried to answer this question in *Reflections on the End of an Era* in two ways: (1) by showing that imperfections would not be totally eradicated even in a Marxist society and (2) by proving that human beings needed something other than Marxist social theory to cope with those imperfections.

The proposition that imperfections would be permanent in human history was substantiated in Niebuhr’s elaboration of the balance of power. In *Moral Man*, the balance of power had been discussed in spurts. In *Reflections* an entire chapter was given to it. Niebuhr now regarded the balance of power as the central principle of radical politics. That was tantamount to admitting that “even the most imaginative political policy will fail to achieve perfect justice” (p. 243). He had not forgotten what he had said in *Moral Man* two years earlier: “Human society is a battleground.” The principle of the balance of power, then, could mitigate conflicts among human wills and self-interests by counterbalancing privileges and powers. But it was not a political panacea. “Every balance of power and every equilibrium of social forces is a potential chaos” (p. 245).

If the need for the balance of power was permanent, Niebuhr argued that the root cause of that need lay not in the defects of the social, but in the heart of the human. In short, it lay in egocentrism, selfishness, indeed, in sin. Nothing in the world, even Marxism, would be able to provide the final solution to this problem. It could be solved only by divine grace. Grace was the power of divine forgiveness to overcome the corruption sin brought about. It was the source of a religious serenity that sprang from the certainty that there were divine resources of mercy to overcome the contradiction between what we were and what we ought to be. Niebuhr concluded that grace alone “makes present reality bearable” even while “God is denied, frustrated, and defied in the im-

mediate situation” (pp. 281–282).

Here Niebuhr came back full circle to the point where he had left off in *Does Civilization Need Religion?*: Christians were the agents of social transformation. In the mid-1930s, however, he was no longer hopeful of liberal Christians or even Christian idealists. The Christians America needed so desperately were those who renounced optimism, quietism, and social irresponsibility, but were willing to participate in the nitty-gritty of the power struggle armed with Marxist insight, humility, and religious serenity. Elsewhere, Niebuhr coined the word “Marxist Christians” for such people. In a nutshell, *Reflections on the End of an Era* was a passionate apologetics for a synthesis of Christianity and Marxism.

In my opinion adequate spiritual guidance can come only through a more radical political orientation and more conservative religious convictions than are comprehended in the culture of our era. (p. ix)

IV

Niebuhr’s attempt at synthesizing Christianity and Marxism gained momentum in 1935 when he founded *Radical Religion*, a quarterly magazine for socialist Christians. The primary purpose of the quarterly was to pursue the question, “To what degree must and can a Christian accept a Marxian economic and political strategy?”²⁷ Niebuhr still believed that the social ownership of the means of production was the only reliable basis for justice in industrial society. He was equally clear that the establishment of the social ideal would be possible only through a social struggle and that Christians ought to be on the side of revolutionaries.²⁸ In the meantime, the very question that had been nagging him since *Reflections on the End of an Era* remained: how could revolutionaries be free from vindictiveness and cruelty to their foes? He recognized that “there are problems of life which transcend the social struggle.”²⁹

It was about this time that Niebuhr started to delve into the nature and destiny of human beings with the help of Augustine.³⁰ His renewed interest in theology coincided with fascism taking firm control in Europe. This political threat in the international arena caused a subtle shift of emphasis in Niebuhr’s Christian-Marxist synthesis. It suddenly dawned on him that defending democratic institutions against the peril of fascism was far more crucial than working for Marxist revolution.³¹

So he resigned from The Fellowship of Reconciliation, a pacifist organization,³² retracted his insistence on American neutrality in Europe, and openly advocated economic sanctions against Italy for its invasion of Ethiopia.³³ By the winter of 1936, Niebuhr's enthusiasm for Marxism had cooled off to the extent that he limited its advantage over fascism to its consistent aversion to nationalism.³⁴

So in the mid-1930s, a radically new element appeared in Niebuhr's vision of America. America could no longer escape participation in the complex power struggle in international politics, even if it had to defend capitalism. Here the tragic nature of human history was revealed to the core. As he would point out to Richard Roberts, his pacifist critic, in 1940, no one could "live in history without sinning."³⁵ The Christian doctrine of grace as the "power to make the present reality bearable" must have become more meaningful to him than ever. Such was the historical and existential context in which Niebuhr wrote his fourth major book, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935).³⁶

In the preface to the 1956 edition of the book, Niebuhr clarified the issue before him as follows: "The primary issue is how it is possible to derive a social ethic from the absolute ethic of the gospels" (p. 9). Here Marxism definitely took a back seat to Christian theology. The point that he hammered away at throughout the book was that Christian faith alone enabled humans to participate constructively in the process of establishing justice. It alone could check human pretensions. In short, *An Interpretation* attempted to answer the question in which neither *Moral Man* nor *Reflections* was really interested: what is the nature of human beings as responsible actors in society?

Niebuhr no longer insisted that economic power was the only fundamental form of power in society. His attention was focused on political power more than ever (p. 128). Having made it clear that there were no clear-cut solutions in politics, he admonished his readers to learn to live with frustrations. We were not justified by our accomplishments but by God who is the final source of the meaning of our life (pp. 201-213).

Christianity, therefore, is not a message of renunciation of the world; nor is it a call for the absolutization of the political. Rather, it is a call for responsible service in the world. This affirmation alone does justice to the dialectical nature of human beings. We are infinitely creative due to our self-transcendence. But this uniquely human capaci-

ty does not have its own ability to fulfill itself. Unfortunately, however, we always try to fulfill it by our own power. Niebuhr called this attempt to make absolute claims for partial and finite values “sin.” In short, it is “man’s claim to make himself God” (p. 82). As long as human nature remains as it is, a finite creature constantly aspiring to be infinite, the realization of a perfect society will be impossible.

What was the perspective from which Niebuhr analyzed human beings? Where did he find the norm of the human self? His answer was clear: in the sacrificial love of Jesus, an utterly imprudent heedlessness. Its content is the love commandment of the Sermon on the Mount: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Due to human sin, *agape* will never cease to be in the realm of approximation. And yet, “we must insist on the relevance of the ideal of love to the moral experience of mankind on every conceivable level” (p. 98). Here Niebuhr coined a new expression to emphasize the transcendent and imminent nature of love: love as “an impossible possibility” (p. 109). Though it will never be fully realized in either intention or action, it will continue to make possible the kind of searching criticism of both intention and action that provides the impetus for the highest moral creativity.

It was in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, then, that Niebuhr shifted emphasis from analysis of the social structures of classes and nations to the moral and ethical responsibility of the individual Christian. From then on, he stopped drawing blueprints for socialist revolution of any kind.³⁷ Fearful of the increasing threats of fascism in Europe and Asia issued by Germany, Italy and Japan and disappointed in the quality of political revolution in Russia,³⁸ he saw America more and more in terms of the defender of democracy.

But this does not mean that Niebuhr had lost his passion for social justice. What he based his social ethics on in place of Marxism was the biblical concept of the Kingdom of God. One of Niebuhr’s earliest discussions on this is found in *Beyond Tragedy*, a collection of his sermonic essays published in 1937.³⁹ For him, the Kingdom of God was neither a particular place in history nor some kind of imaginative ideal totally unrelated to human existence. In essence, the Kingdom of God is what the world ought to be; it constantly lures human existence to something better than what it is. In that sense, the Kingdom of God is “in” but not “of” the world (p. 277). Put more concretely, it is always in “man’s uneasy conscience” (p. 279).

So the Kingdom of God is “relevant to every moment of history” (p.

285). It finds every form of human justice, even the Marxist kind, containing elements of injustice. It indicts the unequal elements of every form of equality. It reveals the pretensions of every nation. Under the Kingdom of God, it is impossible for us to be totally complacent of human reality. "We may continue to be disobedient to the heavenly vision; but [we] can never be as we have been" (p. 284). Here the contradiction between the norm of the individual (unselfishness) and the norm of society (equal justice) was resolved in Niebuhr. Love was made the ultimate norm of both the individual and society. This new insight of Niebuhr provided the basis of his later and mature understanding of justice as "the relative embodiment of *agape* in the structures of society."⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

Niebuhr's vision of America reached its mature stage in the latter part of the 1930s. He became increasingly interested in finding proximate solutions for the perennial problems of the human and the social. His focus from that time was, in the words of Larry Rasmussen, on "action creative of a progressive justice in the moment history now presents us."⁴¹ For this, Niebuhr had to pay attention to the indeterminate possibilities of human history. The determinism of Marxism was no longer sufficient. His setting aside of Marxism meant that instead of defining his own vision of America in precise terms, he incorporated it into a principle of criticism by which every human achievement, both individual and collective, was judged, corrected, and transformed.

Niebuhr's mature vision of America defies attempts at precise definition. The reason for that may be that it has no independent basis. As a correlative concept, it makes sense only in relation to every concrete form of justice that American people create. Be that as it may, we can say at least this. For the mature Niebuhr, America was no longer a nation waiting for a grandiose Marxist experiment. Rather, it was a nation where citizens were encouraged to participate in "the nicely calculated less and more of the relatively good and the relatively evil"⁴² with patience, resilience, and humility. Here Niebuhr finally reached the magnanimous level of Abraham Lincoln with regard to the destiny of America: a nation endowed with a unique responsibility without being allowed to claim a special virtue.

¹ Taken from the title of Niebuhr's tenth major book, *Discerning the Signs of the Times*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946.

² See Richard Wightman Fox, "Niebuhr's World and Ours," *Reinhold Niebuhr Today*. ed. Richard John Neuhaus. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989, p. 2.

³ William J. Wolf, *Lincoln's Religion*. Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1959.

⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr [cited hereafter as RN], "The Religion of Abraham Lincoln," *The Christian Century* (February 10, 1966) [cited hereafter as *CCY*], pp. 172-175.

⁵ See, for example, Richard Shaull, "Response," *Christianity and Crisis* (May 1, 1972), pp. 108-9.

⁶ RN, "Intellectual Autobiography," *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*. ed. by Charles W. Kegley. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984 [cited hereafter as "Autobiography"], p. 5.

⁷ RN, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*. Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1957 [cited hereafter as *Leaves*], p. 61.

⁸ RN, "Autobiography," p. 6.

⁹ RN, "Impotent Liberalism," *CCY* (February 11, 1926), p. 167.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ RN, *Leaves*, p. 147.

¹² RN, *Does Civilization Need Religion?*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934 [cited hereafter as *DCNR*].

¹³ RN, *Leaves*, p. 134.

¹⁴ RN, *DCNR*, p. 181.

¹⁵ RN, "Socialism and Christianity," *CCY* (August 19, 1931), p. 1039.

¹⁶ Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985, pp. 135-136.

¹⁷ [RN], "Ex Cathedra," *World Tomorrow* (December 21, 1932) [cited hereafter as *WT*], p. 578.

¹⁸ RN, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932.

¹⁹ John C. Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethics," *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

²⁰ H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Grace of Doing Nothing," *CCY* (March 23, 1932), pp. 378-380.

²¹ RN, "Must We Do Nothing?," *CCY* (March 30, 1932), p. 417.

²² RN, "Why I Leave the F.O.R.," *CCY* (January 3, 1934). Reprinted in *Love and Justice*. ed. by D. B. Robertson. Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1967, p. 257.

²³ RN, *Reflections on the End of an Era*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932.

²⁴ RN, "Shall We Seek World Peace or the Peace of America?," *WT* (March 15, 1934), pp. 132-133.

²⁵ RN, "After Capitalism—What?," *WT* (May, 1933), p. 264.

²⁶ RN, "New Deal Medicine," *Radical Religion* (Spring, 1939) [cited hereafter as *RR*], p. 2.

²⁷ RN, *RR* (Autumn, 1935), p. 3.

²⁸ Niebuhr mulled over the possibilities of establishing a coalition between farmers and workers in the form of a Farmer-Labor Party. RN, "The Revolutionary Moment," *American Socialist Quarterly* (June, 1935), p. 13.

²⁹ RN, *RR* (Winter, 1936), p. 2.

³⁰ RN, "Autobiography," p. 9.

³¹ RN, "The United Front," *RR* (Winter, 1936), p. 4. and "Fascism, Communism, and Christianity," *RR* (Winter, 1936), pp. 7-8.

³² RN, "Why I Leave the F.O.R.," *op. cit.*, pp. 254-260.

³³ RN, "On the Ethiopian War," *RR* (Fall, 1935), pp. 6-8.

³⁴ RN, "Fascism, Communism, and Christianity," *op. cit.*, p. 8.

³⁵ RN, "An Open Letter to Richard Roberts," *Christianity and Society* (Summer, 1940). Reprinted in *Love and Justice*, *op. cit.*, pp. 267-271.

³⁶ In this paper we are using RN, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*. Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1956 [cited hereafter as *ICE*].

³⁷ On Niebuhr's lack of interest in a new social theory after abandoning Marxism, see Dennis P. McCann, *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1981, pp. 105-129.

³⁸ RN, "The Hitler-Stalin Pact," *RR* (Fall, 1939), pp. 1-3. He comments that the degradation of communism is worse than that of fascism.

³⁹ RN, *Beyond Tragedy*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937.

⁴⁰ Gordon Harland, *The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960, p. 23.

⁴¹ Larry Rasmussen, "Introduction," *Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989, p. 5.

⁴² RN, *ICE*, p. 97.