

REINHOLD NIEBUHR AND LIBERAL PACIFISM, 1914-1940

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By

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A Thesis
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree
Master of Arts

McMaster University
December, 1989

MASTER OF ARTS (1989)
(Religious Studies)

McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario

Title: Reinhold Niebuhr and Liberal Pacifism, 1914-1940

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Number of pages: vi, 78

ABSTRACT

Many contemporary theologians and political thinkers find in the life and writings of Reinhold Niebuhr the strong critique of complacency and evidence of an unrelenting quest for social justice. Others, however, interpret Niebuhr in the light of neo-conservative tenets, and see him as one father of American political realism with its appreciation for stable community life and tradition. These two polarities of interpretation highlight the split between left-liberal sympathies for a theology and politics of liberation and the right-liberal disposition toward values expressed most fully in a democratic capitalism. That thoughtful people of both political and/or theological stripes can trace their intellectual roots back to Niebuhr is witness to the complexity of Niebuhr's thought.

Within the broad agenda suggested by these observations, this study seeks to develop and analyze Niebuhr's position on 20th century liberal pacifism. Specifically, it is concerned to trace Niebuhr's reaction against older styles of liberal theology which lent credibility and theoretical support to, among other things, the liberal pacifism which achieved some status in the political and theological debates of wartime North America. The concluding section of the thesis attempts to draw from the study of Niebuhr's criticism of liberal pacifism certain principles which hint at the resolution of the polarities of interpretation of Niebuhr's corpus.

I would not deny, however, that although I should not have been among the crucifiers of Jesus, I should also have not been among his supporters. For I cannot help withstanding evil when I see that it is about to destroy the good. I am forced to withstand the evil in the world just as the evil within myself. I can only strive not to have to do so by force. But if there is no way of preventing the good, I trust I shall use force and give myself up into God's hands . . . If I am to confess what is truth for me, I must say: There is nothing better for a man than to deal justly - unless it be to love; we should be able even to fight for justice - but to fight lovingly.

Martin Buber (1939)

In a perfect world we'd all sing in tune,
But this is reality so give me some room.

Billy Bragg ("Waiting for the Great Leap Forwards", 1988)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Dr. John Robertson, Dr. Gerard Vallee, Dr. Louis Greenspan, and Dr. Travis Kroeker for their invaluable insight and guidance. As well, I should like to thank my friends and family (they know who they are) without whom I may not have been able to complete this project.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....v
INTRODUCTION.....1
CHAPTER I - PACIFISM AND THE YOUNG NIEBUHR.....8
 1. The Ruhr Valley Confession.....10
CHAPTER II - THE EARLY CRITICISM OF PACIFISM.....14
CHAPTER III - THE CONTRIBUTION AND CHALLENGE OF
 H. RICHARD NIEBUHR.....19
CHAPTER IV - THE CRITIQUE OF LIBERAL PACIFISM IN
 MORAL MAN AND IMMORAL SOCIETY.....27
 1. The Religious and Political Perspectives.....37
CHAPTER V - THE DEBATE ENCOUNTERS NAZI AGGRESSION.....45
CHAPTER VI - NIEBUHR'S ASSESSMENT OF THE THEOLOGY
 OF LIBERAL PACIFISM.....56
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS.....63
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....77

INTRODUCTION

There has been in recent years a "renaissance" of interest in the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr. Study of his work is especially timely for several reasons, not the least of which is the rise to prominence - at least in Anglo-American politics - of more "conservative" powers and policies. One need only give a cursory glance at the results of recent elections in both the United States and Canada to see that this is a significant trend in modern international politics. Recently a Michigan member of Congress, the son of evangelical theologian Carl F. Henry, was asked how he could justify his support for the contras in Nicaragua in light of his Christian faith. He is said to have responded, "If you really want to know, look up Reinhold Niebuhr".¹

Robert McAfee Brown, who actually studied and taught with Niebuhr, finds this hailing of Niebuhr as a precursor of the new conservatism astonishing. "It remains curious (and painful) to those who knew Niebuhr and whose thought was shaped by his", writes Brown, "that many in the new generation . . . use him to support extreme conservative positions he would almost surely have opposed".² Yet Michael Novak, a prominent "neo-

¹Letter by Bill Kellerman, contributing editor of Sojourners magazine, Vol. 16, No. 6, June 1987.

²Robert McAfee Brown's introduction to The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. xxi-xxii.

conservative" who also claims Niebuhr as his spiritual father, would have little trouble embracing the Congressman's remarks. While Brown finds in Niebuhr the strong critique of complacency and the unrelenting quest for social justice, Novak might interpret Niebuhr in the light of neo-conservative tenets, and see him as a father of American political realism with its appreciation for tradition and community. Their differences highlight the split between the left-liberal sympathies for a theology of liberation and the right-liberal disposition toward values expressed most fully in a democratic capitalism.³ That both Brown and Novak (important theologians in their own right) trace their intellectual roots back to Niebuhr is witness to the complexity of Niebuhr's thought. With this thesis I shall be grappling with one of the world's most important modern Western thinkers. And within the broad agenda suggested by the foregoing observations, I am concerned to elucidate Niebuhr's position on liberal pacifism, to trace his struggle with it to the outbreak of World War II, and to clarify the arguments he uses to criticize it. Further, in the process it is hoped that we will arrive at some understanding of Niebuhr's analysis of the inter-relation between love, justice, and power - all of which bear on our overarching question in fascinating ways.

Broadly speaking, pacifism centers on the relationship between love and coercion, or the use of violence. Is it

³See R. Fox, Reinhold Niebuhr, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. ix-x.

possible to be loving and coercive at the same time? How do we hold together the attempt to live a "selfless" life with the reality of force and conflict? Is violence altogether that necessary? These are only some of the questions that make up the host of complex issues with which pacifism is fraught. Our particular concentration throughout the discussion will be on Niebuhr, for whom the popularity of pacifism (especially liberal pacifism) in the first four decades of this century brought into sharp focus the tension between the Christian law of love (thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself) where life is brought into harmony with life, and the use of coercion or force as a means of either asserting legitimate claims of the self, or of safeguarding them. Pacifism and most of its variations is to be found, in Niebuhr's view, in those situations where the option of absolute non-resistance is exercised in the face of violent aggression.

We will begin by noting Niebuhr's attitude toward pacifism in the early years of his career - through World War I and into the early 1920's. The purpose of this strategy is to demonstrate an enduring and characteristic aspect of Niebuhr's intellectual pilgrimage early on: his openness to experience. As a young man, Niebuhr's position on the question of pacifism altered several times, but never whimsically so. His thinking shows the mind of one who would take the stimulus of his immediate personal world, and the larger international scene, quite seriously. Niebuhr was never one to embrace political dogmatism; at the end

of the day he favoured an approach to difficult questions that was more experiential and pragmatic in character.

The years following his visit to the Ruhr Valley (in 1923) are quite transitional in terms of Niebuhr's attitude on the pacifist issue. Through the 1920's Niebuhr is still liberal and still sees himself in the light of convictions expressed in response to the Ruhr visit. He cannot bring himself to advocate coercion or violence on any scale, yet his disaffection with the apparent naivete and hypocrisy of the liberal-pacifist agenda (and especially the "outlawry of war" movement) grows incrementally as the decade wears on. Niebuhr's essential position on pacifism would change for the last time in 1932 with the publication of his ground-breaking Moral Man and Immoral Society. Here, finally, we find arguments against liberal pacifism that set the tone of his thought on the subject for the rest of his life.

For the mature Niebuhr, pacifism as non-resistance implies the following fallacies: (1) That there is no difference between the morality of the individual person and that of collectives or groups. (2) That social ideals - such as those embodied in the Kingdom of God - can be actualized in history, and through our own powers. (3) That human beings are perfectible creatures. These three elements were of the very nature of the liberal pacifist position which Niebuhr criticizes from 1932 onwards. We shall anticipate what follows in the body of the thesis by briefly considering those areas of Niebuhr's thought which have

direct bearing on the issues raised by these statements.

The first of these fallacious statements directs us to an aspect of Niebuhr's thought which is extremely important. Niebuhr is now famous for having developed a conception of ethics that takes into account the morality of both the individual and the collective. This dual emphasis and distinction are developed most extensively in Moral Man (1932), and again, though not to the same degree, in An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935).

The obligation of the individual, Niebuhr argues, is to serve and comply with the law of love. But human collectives, he observes, are not individuals and therefore cannot be "unselfish" in the same way or to the same extent. Niebuhr's point is that the moral capacities of the individual conscience outstrip by far, in his view, those of the collective. If we understand the refusal to assert the interests of the self (including the urge to self-preservation) as a form of unselfishness, pacifism can be seen as an expression of this ideal. It may be a viable alternative for the individual, according to Niebuhr, but for the collective and its representatives it is inappropriate. Hugh Cecil is quoted by Niebuhr with approval: "No one has the right to be unselfish with other people's interests".⁴

The second aspect of Niebuhr's thought which has significance for the criticism of pacifism is his understanding

4R. Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), p. 267.

of the relevance (and irrelevance) of ethical ideals. This is developed most fully in the fourth chapter of An Interpretation: "The Relevance of an Impossible Ethical Ideal". It is in the context of discussing ideals such as those embodied in the Sermon of the Mount that Niebuhr develops the notion that while ethical ideals may hover over every moral question as goals, guides, and aims, they cannot be made into simple options for justice. According to Niebuhr's first argument against pacifism, then, non-resistance is at best an individual, rather than a collective, moral option. According to his second line of argument, non-resistance is ethically too ideal to be made collectively concrete in a relative and sinful world.

Finally, liberal pacifism verges on heresy, in Niebuhr's view, because of its "Renaissance faith" in the perfectibility of humanity and in its emphasis on the process of sanctification over against the Reformation doctrine (Lutheran in origin) of justification by faith alone.

These three points are aspects of the whole of Niebuhr's thought which bear directly on the illusions regarding human interaction and human nature which he sees at the heart of liberal pacifist thinking, and the essential character of Niebuhr's anti-pacifist posture did not change from this critique and variations on it (even after 1932 when he published Moral Man). What follows after this seminal text, so far as the debate on pacifism goes, is really a fleshing out of trajectories of

argument already present between in covers.5

5In addition to this important text, however, we will draw significantly from An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935), Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, Niebuhr's diary to 1928, The Nature and Destiny of Man (1939), and several shorter but exemplary pieces (including some letters and sermons). As well, the reader will find numerous references to Richard Fox's biography Reinhold Niebuhr (1985), to Roland Bainton's history of pacifism, Christian Attitudes toward War and Peace (1960), to Arthur J. Schlesinger, Jr.'s The Cycles of American History (1986), and to Michael Howard's The Causes of Wars (1983).

I: Pacifism and the Young Niebuhr

The attitude of the young Niebuhr toward the question of pacifism and violence is best seen in the context of his perspective on the involvement of the United States in World War I. Niebuhr's thought on the subject at this stage is comprised of a tension between skepticism and loyalty.

Niebuhr's skepticism toward the rhetoric which sanctions a war effort can be seen in what he understands, at this stage, as the nation's "crime" against the individual soldier in a time of war. At the level of the individual combatant, Niebuhr could appreciate armed conflict in terms of its eliciting noble passions - courage, for instance, expressed in the willingness to sacrifice one's life for another. At the level of international relations, however, Niebuhr found it difficult to countenance the fact that nations often put such passions to less than noble use. In times of war, according to Niebuhr, loyalty and courage are made ultimate virtues "without regard to the ends which these virtues may serve".⁶ From Niebuhr's perspective, such sacrifices could be, and often were, made in vain:

The willingness of men to die in struggles that effect no permanent good and leave no contribution to civilization makes the tragedy of individual life all the more pathetic. The crime of the nation against the individual is not that it demands his sacrifices against his will, but that it claims a life of eternal significance for ends that have no eternal value.⁷

Even while on a speaking tour of German Evangelical congregations

⁶ Fox, RN, p. 46.

⁷Fox, RN, p. 47.

and military camps in the U.S. in an effort to stir up loyalist sentiment, Niebuhr confessed to having some serious second thoughts about modern warfare:

When I talk to the boys I make much of the Wilsonian program as against the kind of diplomacy which brought on the war. But it is easier to talk about the aims of the war than to justify its methods.⁸

Yet whatever private doubts Niebuhr may have harbored, both his correspondence and his public statements "bristled with militancy", according to Fox, in support of the American war effort after the U.S. entered the fray in 1917.

At this stage, the tension in Niebuhr's thought between the loyalist and the skeptical perspectives is resolved more in the direction of the loyalist. For him, pacifism stands in the way of declaring allegiance to a "new nation" sensitive to the foreign elements within its borders. He writes in his diary:

I cannot bring myself to associate with the pacifists. Perhaps if I were not of German blood I could. That may be cowardly but I think a new nation has a right to be pretty sensitive about its unity.⁹

Niebuhr even goes so far as to later seek military service as a chaplain: "As a young man of draft age I no longer feel it right that I should stay out of the struggle".¹⁰

Clearly, for the young Niebuhr, the question of pacifism is rooted not in some abstract philosophical debate but in his

⁸R. Niebuhr, Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1929), p. 14.

⁹Niebuhr, Leaves, p. 14.

¹⁰Fox, RN, p.55.

intense effort to slough off his German heritage in favour of what he wants desperately to be his real identity: Niebuhr wants to be and to appear as being an American. The United States does have the right, in the mind of the young Niebuhr, to ask of him his allegiance in a time of international crisis. Niebuhr for now is content to respond, outwardly at least, with a youthful bellicosity of support. The effort to become American, despite his having been born there, is of more import than a rigorous pacifism which clearly has some alluring moral qualities for him.

The hopes of 1919, however, of "making the world safe for democracy", went unfulfilled, and by the early 1920's Niebuhr is again expressing strong doubts about Wilsonian diplomacy.

Eventually, he comes to regret his defence of the war effort on the basis of Wilson's reformist principles. As Fox writes:

(Niebuhr) had imagined that Wilson could throw the weight of the American nation behind the Allies and then enforce a new world order based on reconciliation, democracy, and open markets. Like other liberal he failed to notice that such a world order was on one level a Pax Americana of direct political and economic advantage to the United States.¹¹

Niebuhr had justified American participation in World War I by referring to lofty ideals, but he is now growing increasingly cynical of these ideals. Soon, in the Ruhr Valley of 1923, Niebuhr would declare himself a pacifist upon witnessing firsthand the vengeance wrought upon the German civilian population by the French occupying forces.

¹¹Fox, RN, p. 58.

The Ruhr Valley Confession

In June of 1923 Niebuhr, with friends Sherwood Eddy and Kirby Page and thirty others, sailed for England on a ten week "American Seminar" comprised of interviews and lectures delivered by English dignitaries. Fox notes that much of the talk while in England focussed on the French occupation of the Ruhr Valley - Poincare's six-month-old attempt to extract unpaid German dues by seizing control of Germany's industrial centre.¹² In early July, upon hearing that the French were about to close access to the Ruhr, Niebuhr decided to witness what he could of the occupation firsthand. The visit prompted the following thoughts and reflections which he entered in his personal diary:

The Ruhr cities are the closest thing to hell I have ever seen. I never knew that you could see hatred with the naked eye, but in the Ruhr one is under the illusion that this is possible. The atmosphere is charged with it If you can gain the confidence of Germans so that they will talk they will tell you horrible tales of atrocities, deportations, sex crimes, etc. Imagination fired by fear and hatred undoubtedly tends to elaborate upon the facts. But the facts are bad enough.¹³

Niebuhr was so appalled at the near starvation of German children, and the brutality of the French occupation forces, that he made this emotional resolution in the same journal entry:

One would like to send every sentimental spellbinder of war days into the Ruhr. This then is the glorious issue for which the war was fought!

This is as good a time as any to make up my mind that I am done with the war business. Of course, I wasn't really in the last war. Would that I had been!

¹²For an account of Niebuhr's trip, see Fox, RN, p. 78ff.

¹³Niebuhr, Leaves, p. 46.

Of course, we really couldn't know everything we know now. But now we know. The times of man's ignorance God may wink at, but now he calls us all to repent. I am done with this business. I hope I can make that resolution stick.¹⁴

As Fox notes, the vindictive Versailles Treaty had again made Niebuhr skeptical about wars fought for liberal ideals. The hatred and suffering that Niebuhr observed in the Ruhr Valley in 1923 persuaded him not only to reject all war, but also to project this sentiment as much as possible into all of his relationships. Thus begins the "adventure of trust":

For my own part I am not going to let my decision in regard to war stand alone. I am going to try to be a disciple of Christ, rather than a mere Christian, in all human relations and experiment with the potency of trust and love much more than I have in the past.¹⁵

The sentiments expressed in this diary entry were to characterize Niebuhr's thought and action through to the end of the 1920's. And yet, according to Fox, Niebuhr had good reason to doubt that he could make his resolution stick. For one who struggled so deeply with the notion of realism about human nature and society, this pacifist orientation seems an anomaly. Fox writes:

Niebuhr never made a good pacifist, even when his emotions were most predisposed, as they were in the Ruhr. He was too aware of the possibility . . . that 'the principle of non-resistance' is too ideal for a sinful human world.¹⁶

Clearly, Niebuhr's attitude toward pacifism vacillates significantly throughout his years as a young adult (1914-1925).

¹⁴Niebuhr, Leaves, p. 47.

¹⁵Niebuhr, Leaves, p. 48.

¹⁶Fox, RN, p. 98ff.

His pacifist and non-pacifist declarations both were never without some kind of qualification. Niebuhr's convictions around the pacifist question seem provisional at this stage in his life, and his written and verbal communications were, by all accounts, gilded with reservations about strategies of non-resistance in a world of conflict. I believe this can be seen, in the very least, as witness to Niebuhr's sincere attempt to be open to and integrate life experience into his thought.

II: The Early Criticism of Pacifism (1929-31)

The period from 1926 to 1931 represents a stage in Niebuhr's perspective on the pacifist question which is less provisional than in his early years. Niebuhr's convictions now foreshadow the full criticism of pacifism that we find in Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932). This period marks the beginning of Niebuhr's mature argument against pacifism, and is a prelude to his full rejection of non-resistance as a political strategy. It is a significant stage for Niebuhr, firstly because of the publication of his "Critique of Pacifism" in the May 1927 issue of the Atlantic, and secondly, because of a short series of discussions with his brother H. Richard Niebuhr on various Christian responses to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931.

Fox's picture of the Reinhold Niebuhr of these years is fascinating because Niebuhr is seen as a man of intellectual polarities and tensions. One side of him was moving steadily toward Socialism (Niebuhr was to join the American Socialist Party in 1929). The other side of Niebuhr, according to Fox, was "applying the brakes" because of strong convictions regarding the Christian law of love. Niebuhr was still liberal enough to believe that love had to be invoked indiscriminately in all human relationships, individual and collective. At the centre of this polarity was the growing attraction of Socialism for Niebuhr, which at the same time seemed too akin to the Communism which he rejected as an unchristian "strategy of hate". The question

turned on how, if at all, Niebuhr could integrate a political philosophy that had, at its basis, not love but the confrontational, even violent, struggle for justice. Fox points out that the Niebuhr of the 1920's was not yet ready to advocate force, much less violence, in the struggle for social equality. But Niebuhr did not as a consequence disengage himself from the question. Instead he began to doubt, openly, the Christian liberalism which naively expected love to work (a world-view to which many of his friends and colleagues subscribed). At this stage in his career, we shall see that Niebuhr cannot furnish a positive alternative to pacifism. He confines himself, rather, to the negative task of giving expression to the falsehood of pacifism. "A Critique of Pacifism" is prime evidence of Niebuhr's efforts in this direction.

Niebuhr would be misrepresented if it were not noted that, in 1927, he counts himself among those Americans who espouse the cause of pacifism - of non-resistance and mutual trust. In his journal entry regarding his experience in the Ruhr Valley in 1923, Niebuhr had written:

I am done with this business . . . I am not going to let my decision in regard to war stand alone. I am going to try to . . . experiment with the potency of trust and love much more than I have in the past.¹

In 1927, four years later, Niebuhr still sees himself in terms of this "experiment". His language in "A Critique of Pacifism" is reminiscent of the journal entry noted above. Niebuhr speaks, in

¹Niebuhr, Leaves, p. 46f.

speaks, in "A Critique", of pacifism as an "adventure of trust" borne of religious imagination which "maintains that trust itself is creative, that men tend to become what we think they are, that they become trustworthy only as we trust them and lovable only as we love them".² At times Niebuhr insists with his pacifist colleagues that "if our nation or any other nation would be willing to make the venture of disarmament itself it could successfully challenge its neighbors to similar experiments in confidence".³ There is no reason, according to pacifists such as C.C. Morrison and Kirby Page, why at this time a "simultaneous experiment in disarmament and mutual trust" should not be initiated.⁴ But Niebuhr, in his "Critique", is at pains to expose the naivete and potential hypocrisy of the pacifist position and the "outlawry of war" movement with which it had become identified (thereby distancing himself from some of his closest friends and colleagues).

One major locus of hypocrisy, according to Niebuhr, is the "outlawry of war" movement of the 1920's and '30's. For Niebuhr it is an "ethical sublimation of an essentially selfish national position".⁵ It is an attempt to gloss over isolationist sentiment by muddying the water with a poetic vision of America

²Niebuhr, "A Critique of Pacifism", Atlantic, Vol. 139, No. 5, May 1927, p. 638.

³Ibid, p. 638.

⁴Ibid, p. 638.

⁵Ibid, p. 641.

standing alone so as not, in Niebuhr's view, to spoil her "virtue". Essentially, this movement gives sanction to a "policy of isolation which has its real basis in quite other considerations".⁶ Niebuhr is concerned here that he and his pacifist colleagues may have forgotten that "America today has a standard of living in such flagrant disproportion to that of any other part of the world that it is arousing the envy of practically every nation".⁷ The material advantages that Niebuhr and his fellow "adventurers" enjoy destroy human fellowship, according to Niebuhr, and make the use of force necessary. It requires an army, in other words, to preserve such a standard of living: "Those of us who are pacifists ought to realize more clearly than we do that spiritual attitudes can never guarantee us security in the possession of material advantages".⁸ But most Americans, Niebuhr notes with irony, have never given thought to these economic realities. They wish for the United States to trust the world and expect that this trust will not go unrequited. For Niebuhr, their faith is naive:

They do not realize that a nation cannot afford to trust anyone if it is not willing to go the length of sharing its advantages. Love which expresses itself in trust without expressing itself in sacrifice is futile. It is not thoroughgoing enough to be creative or redemptive.⁹

Niebuhr's point is not that love cannot "work" amongst the

⁶Ibid, p. 641.

⁷Ibid, p.639.

⁸Ibid, p. 641.

⁹Ibid, p. 640.

relationships between nations. He is still too liberal in 1927 to give up the belief that it can.¹⁰ His plea is, rather, for consistency: It is not that our willingness to love and to trust is wrong-headed. It is, rather, that this stops too short of the mark to be efficacious or redemptive:

Many individual idealists are taking the justified position that the best way to bring unethical groups under ethical control is to dissociate themselves clearly from the unethical conduct of the group, at whatever cost. Too few of them have realized that, if such action is to be morally redemptive, it must dissociate the individual not only from the policy of using force but from the policy of insisting on material advantages which destroy human fellowship and make the use of force necessary.¹¹

Niebuhr cannot yet bring himself to condemn as irresponsible (or irrelevant) the "justified position" of the pacifist idealists. He opts at this stage for an "engaged" pacifist strategy, as opposed to an isolationist or purist one. What remains for Niebuhr to come to grips with and articulate, however, is that engagement cannot remain pacifist for very long in increasingly perilous international circumstances.

¹⁰See Fox, RN, p. 99.

¹¹Niebuhr, "A Critique of Pacifism", p. 641.

III: The Contribution and Challenge of H. Richard Niebuhr

It is interesting that the only published disagreement (according to Fox) between brothers Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr occurred in March of 1932, and centred on precisely the question of the viability of non-resistance as a responsible Christian attitude. In his "The Grace of Doing Nothing" (Christian Century, March 23, 1932), one of the so-called "War Articles", H. Richard argues for non-intervention by the United States in the Sino-Japanese conflict of the early 1930's. He suggests, instead, that the U.S. should opt for a peculiar kind of activity - which may appear as inactivity to many - repentance.¹

While Reinhold comes out clearly on the side of non-violent coercive measures against Japan (i.e., economic sanctions), H. Richard proposed an alternative course, one in which self-reflection before divine judgement, not moral action, is normative. With this pivotal emphasis on repentance Richard furnishes a critique of all moral action, including pacifism and non-pacifism. Richard B. Miller, one of H. Richard Niebuhr's most recent and able commentators, explains that the latter's conception of repentance "requires all individuals, regardless of their position on war, to recognize the hubris that animates every moral endeavour; repentance focuses our gaze in the

¹Much of what follows is based on "H. Richard Niebuhr's War Articles", by Richard B. Miller, The Journal of Religion, Vol. 68, April 1988, pp. 242-262.

direction of the divine - the eternal - rather than on the moral demands of the passing moment".²

Miller comments that throughout the "War Articles", H. Richard places human action within an extensive matrix of interactive processes. The self is defined as a wider field of activity, not all of which, according to Miller, is a function of individual will or volition. This eventually leads to the conclusion that history is not entirely under human control. H. Richard's concept of morality, therefore, is linked to a theory of human action and agency as responsive and not assertive, because we humans are "thrown" into a multi-dimensional lattice-work of influences upon which our actions depend.

Self-assertion, from H. Richard's perspective, is in this way devalued. And H. Richard refuses Reinhold's call for non-violent coercion against the Japanese in 1932 because such coercion is a form of assertiveness. All this really serves to accomplish, in H. Richard's view, is to involve all participants in a ceaseless cycle of assertion and counter-assertion. According to Miller, H. Richard suggests the breaking of this cycle by having all involved accept that the Kingdom of God is an "emergent" in history - an "unrealized potentiality" -and by having all prepare for it by means of repentance. H. Richard writes: "For me the question is one of 'either-or'; either the Christian method which is not the method of love but of

²Miller, "War Articles", p. 244.

repentance and forgiveness, or the method of self-assertion".³ In fact, God's Kingdom will not emerge so long as we try to impose our patterns on the divine creative process at work in human history. The imposition of our own human patterns is symptomatic of the liberal approach to crises, and Richard sees this at the root of his older brother's suggestion of non-violent coercion.

From H. Richard's point of view, however much Reinhold might insist on the limited options within history (owing to human sinfulness and recalcitrance), he nonetheless expresses with his vote for economic sanctions the confidence that human agency possesses the power to direct the course of wider historical processes. Reinhold remains, in his younger brother's eyes, a liberal.

In his comprehensive piece on the "War Articles", Miller outlines H. Richard's notion of suffering as the presence in our existence of that which is not under our control. It is "the intrusion into our self-legislating existence of an activity operating under another law than ours".⁴ To grasp this fully, an alternative approach to moral action is required, an approach which situates human agency within a complex network of personal and impersonal forces. H. Richard's moral theory is therefore more descriptive than prescriptive. A prescriptive approach to

³HRN, "The Only Way into the Kingdom of God", Christian Century, April 6, 1932, p. 447.

⁴HRN, as quoted by Miller, "War Articles", Journal of Religion, p. 246.

international crises assumes that we are in control of historical affairs. H. Richard's approach, however, recognizes that human beings are dependent upon a wider set of processes. Because of this, H. Richard's method requires that we identify and organize as many morally relevant features of the situation as possible, and only then proceed to developing a response. Attention is given to the peculiarities of the situation, and ethical judgement is postponed to a later stage of the process. The problem with Reinhold's approach to international crises is, from H. Richard's perspective, that it assumes a kind of "epistemological self-confidence": the meaning of the Sino-Japanese conflict is clear, and there can be some consensus about the problem of war and its moral dimensions.⁵ H. Richard has made it his task to attempt to rid conventional approaches to war and conflict from this sort of overweening certainty in having grasped the full nature of the situation at hand. He suggests that we purge ourselves not only by "doing nothing" for the time being, but by also engaging in acts of repentance.

H. Richard's approach to the question of pacifism vs. non-pacifism betrays a theological objectivism, according to Miller.⁶ War, for H. Richard, is crucifixion. It is an exercise in divine judgement. War has visited humanity and has wrought suffering because the forces of God's judgement are immanent in the

⁵For Miller's analysis of the notion of "epistemological self-confidence" see "War Articles", p. 248.

⁶Miller, "War Articles", p. 254f.

personal and impersonal forces of history itself.⁷ War as a whole, for H. Richard, is a sort of imitation of the Christ-event. It is a potentially transformative event in which the innocent are suffering vicariously in the context of a universal judgement.

Christians, therefore, are to repent and then respond to the events of history with patience, trust, and hope that divine redemption will work its course through crises in human history. H. Richard's notion of war as a divine corrective action, according to Miller, suggests that a universal cause, not a particular cause, lies at the heart of war, a cause in which the suffering of the innocent is used for the remaking of the guilty.

It is H. Richard's view that those who, like his brother, support economic sanctions against Japan in the Sino-Japanese conflict are taking a merely moralistic approach - war is the occasion for retributive justice, a situation in which the righteous exercise defence against those who are guilty of aggression. In his article Miller makes it clear that H. Richard effectively deflates this approach by invoking the sovereignty of divine action. God is the chief agent in all of human history, including war. Suffering and redemption are the meaning of the events of history, therefore no human action can be "righteous":

We must do to pacifism and non-pacifism what must be done to all morality: we must purify them of the dross of human conceit. In that way we can elevate our moral conventions from the realm of deception to the realm of truthful

⁷See Miller, "War Articles", p. 253.

guidance.⁸

While Reinhold might find his younger brother's keen interest in purifying morality somewhat ambitious, H. Richard, for his part, thinks that non-violent coercion against Japan is too specific a course of action too soon. Until our basic values have been restructured in the light of the Cross, we will be misguided. Reinhold's approach, from H. Richard's perspective, needs to be relativized in the light of the sovereign, universal presence of God. Otherwise we may be led to act in haste, confident that our cause is the right one, without any understanding of the true meaning of the events that surround us. For H. Richard, the crucial delay that is precipitated by critical self-reflection does not lead to a failure to act, as his critics may have charged, but to an accentuation of individual integrity and moral seriousness. If we act after this repentance, we act as whole persons conscious that any colossal effort to judge goodness and evil, and to reward and punish accordingly, is mistaken.

As Reinhold admits in his response to his brother's article, there is not very much that separates their positions on conventional approaches to ethical discourse regarding war and conflict.⁹ Reinhold, as will be shown in this discussion, shares his younger brother's concern to relativize the conceit of this

⁸HRN, as quoted by Miller, "War Articles", p. 256.

⁹See RN, "Must We Do Nothing?", Christian Century, March 30, 1932, p. 415ff.

discourse. The difference between the two at this stage in their careers is that Reinhold finds this conceit more in liberal pacifism than in non-pacifism, while H. Richard finds it in both strategies equally. The brothers are together concerned to expose the tendency of human beings to elevate their relative perspectives to the realm of absolute truth. Reinhold's appreciation for H. Richard's position, however, is not unqualified.

H. Richard's insistence on repentance and contrition is problematic for his older brother because no clear set of directives follow from it. The danger of H. Richard's position, according to Reinhold, is that a peculiar form of inactivity, namely repentance, seems to lead to nothing more than, in Miller's words, a "religiously proper quietistic vagueness". H. Richard's action theory, when viewed from the perspective of Reinhold's work, appears to be descriptive and responsive, yes, but also passive. Perhaps, Reinhold might suggest, it is better to act than to be too long delayed by the uncertainty of a particular course of action under the light of God's truth. Reinhold, too, would have us recognize that we always fall short of the mark set for us by ourselves, and by God's love, judgement and mercy. But we must not let this fact be an excuse for social paralysis. Certainly one must take as many factors of the situation into account as possible before moving to action. But delaying our response will only cost more human lives.

As to the charge that Reinhold is a liberal, the remainder

of this discussion will show that the elder Niebuhr's thought is far more complex than this label would suggest. Reinhold does not worship at the altar of the liberal god of self-assertion. His own approach to international crises betrays a deep sense of the ambiguity of human moral agency. To anticipate:

In its profoundest insights, the Christian faith sees the whole of human history as involved in guilt, and finds no release from guilt except in the grace of God. The Christian is freed by that grace to act in history, to give his devotion to the highest values he knows, to defend those citadels of civilization of which necessity and historic destiny have made him the defender; and he is persuaded by that grace to remember the ambiguity of even his best actions.¹⁰

¹⁰RN, "Why the Christian Church is not Pacifist", The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, p. 118.

IV: The Critique of Liberal Pacifism in Moral Man and Immoral Society

When Moral Man and Immoral Society was published in December 1932, the Socialist Party in the United States - with which Niebuhr had been closely associated - had just been soundly trounced in both the Presidential and Congressional elections. Fox notes that the Socialist Party had lost before, but what made these results sting was that "this time political and economic conditions had been ideal for a record result" favouring the Party.¹ Niebuhr himself was defeated as a Congressional candidate, and wrote in The World Tomorrow: "The American people seem to be very inert in the face of the sufferings to which they are being subjected".² For Niebuhr, the results of the election gave expression to the overarching problem of the Depression: how to overcome "social inertia" - evidenced by the dismal Socialist showing - and to build a just society. He made this question the focus of Moral Man.

In the book, Niebuhr sets himself the task, in his own words, of "analyzing the moral resources and limitations of human nature".³ Furthermore, he is concerned to trace the consequences of the moral limitations for human group interaction. The aim of this analysis is to arrive at some sort of political strategy, or strategies, through which social inertia can be broken, and a

¹Fox, RN, p. 136.

²RN, as quoted by Fox, RN, p. 136.

³RN, Moral Man, p. xxiv.

just and ethical society can best be approximated.

It is a theory of human nature, then, with its resources and limitations setting the parameters for social interaction, that is at the heart of Niebuhr's vision in Moral Man. It is necessary here, before turning to the question of pacifism directly, to give some attention to this theory, for it sets the context for Niebuhr's full criticism of liberal pacifism found in Moral Man.

Men and women are complex mixtures of reason and passion, intellect and instinct, according to Niebuhr. Reason is a significant component because we are self-conscious, in Niebuhr's view, only insofar as we are rational creatures. And this self-consciousness is very important for Niebuhr because he sees it not only as that which makes human beings unique in the animal kingdom, but also as the seat of human sin:

This self-consciousness increases the urge to preserve and to extend life. In the animal the instincts of self-preservation do not extend beyond the necessities provided by nature. The animal kills when it is hungry and fights or runs when it is in danger. In man the impulses of self-preservation are transmuted very easily into desires for aggrandizement.⁴

"Man is a sinner", Niebuhr wrote almost ten years later in The Nature and Destiny of Man, "his sin is defined as rebellion against God".⁵ And while the theological concept of sin is only briefly explored in Moral Man, we can see that Niebuhr is moving

⁴RN, Moral Man, p. 41.

⁵RN, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), p. 16.

toward a notion of rebellion with the idea of "desire for aggrandizement". The idea of imperialism, personal and collective, is as close to the concept of sin as Niebuhr gets in Moral Man:

Self-consciousness means the recognition of finiteness within infinity. The mind recognizes the ego as an insignificant point amidst the immensities of the world. In all vital self-consciousness there is a note of protest against this finiteness . . . On the secular level it expresses itself in man's effort to universalize himself and give his life a significance beyond himself.⁶

This protest, and our conscious or unconscious efforts to absolutize the self are, for Niebuhr, imperialistic gestures. The root of this imperialism, Niebuhr concludes, is in our self-consciousness.

Human nature is sinful, flawed through to its very roots according to Niebuhr, because of the propensity to misuse this capacity for self-consciousness. To use the more theological language of The Nature and Destiny of Man, this means that "the human spirit has the special capacity of standing continually outside itself in terms of indefinite regression".⁷ Niebuhr locates out freedom as human beings in this capacity for self-transcendence, this capacity for "surveying the world and determining action from a governing center".⁸ But this freedom may be corrupted, for we are "gifted and cursed" with a colourful imagination which extends our appetites and needs "beyond the

6RN, Moral Man, p. 42.

7RN, Nature and Destiny, Vol. I, p. 13.

8RN, Nature and Destiny, Vol. I, p. 14.

requirements of subsistence".⁹ Our will-to-live soon becomes, Niebuhr observes, a will-to-power, and desires which are rooted in the instinct for survival can quickly evolve into various expansive forms of selfishness and avarice. "There is no possibility of drawing a sharp line between the will-to-live and the will-to-power", writes Niebuhr, and "power, once attained, places the individual or group in a position of perilous eminence so that security is possible only by the extension of power".¹⁰

Imperialism, individual and collective, is a fundamental category of human existence in Niebuhr's view. It is significant, however, that the moral quagmire gets even stickier as one moves from individuals to groups:

Nations will always find it more difficult than individuals to behold the beam that is in their own eye while they observe the mote that is in their brother's eye; and individuals find it difficult enough. A perennial weakness of the moral life in individuals is simply raised to the nth degree in national life.¹¹

In this respect and in this respect only can a man or a woman be understood as more "moral" than a society. Individuals do tend to be immoral, contrary to what the title of Niebuhr's treatise would suggest, but "individuals are never as immoral as the social situations in which they are involved and which they symbolize", because only they have a self-transcendent

⁹RN, Moral Man, p. 1.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 42.

¹¹Ibid., p. 107; see also p. 25: "But individual limitations have a cumulative effect in human societies . . .".

consciousness.¹²

The careful reader will note that Niebuhr is at pains to recognize that rational and religious perspectives and "resources" may temper sheer self-assertion toward something more inclusive, but he (Niebuhr) notes soberly throughout Moral Man that the interests of the self will be insinuated into even the most ideal enterprises and most universal objectives.¹³ These, for Niebuhr, are the simple facts of our common human frailty, and such somber observations have significant bearing on his thinking regarding both the liberalism and the liberal pacifism in the North America of the 1930's.

Niebuhr's full criticism of liberal pacifism is contained in the larger project which dominates his career from the late 1920's onward: the critique of American philosophical, political, and theological liberalism. He diagnoses the problem as a form of naivete: his liberal colleagues suffer from an overweening confidence in "the moral capacities of collective man".¹⁴ Niebuhr makes it his task to dispel this myopia through several academic and journalistic installments - Moral Man and Immoral Society stands out as one of these.

Niebuhr's key observation regarding the "Liberal Movement" is that it seems "unconscious of the basic difference between the morality of individuals, and the morality of collectives,

¹²Ibid., p. 248.

¹³Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁴RN, Moral Man, p. xix.

whether races, classes, or nations".¹⁵ With Moral Man Niebuhr develops this distinction, the consequence of which is the refutation, in Niebuhr's view, of "moralistic" approaches to the political order.¹⁶ This distinction, obviously, has immense significance for the pacifist question, for this most Niebuhrian of distinctions "justifies and necessitates political policies which a purely individualistic ethic must always find embarrassing".¹⁷

According to Niebuhr, "a realistic analysis of the problems of human society reveals a constant and seemingly irreconcilable conflict between the needs of society and the imperatives of a sensitive conscience".¹⁸ The problem facing human society, in other words, centers on the tension between expedient, sometimes harsh, measures which safeguard the needs and the interests of the collective, and the more virtuous dictates of the sensitive conscience of the individual.

In accordance with this tension, Niebuhr conceives of two moral spheres, the first of which attends to the "necessities of man's social life", the second of which flows from the "inner life of the individual".¹⁹ In terms of the former perspective,

¹⁵Ibid., p. ix.

¹⁶We begin to see here how the concern of H. Richard Niebuhr that both pacifism and non-pacifism be "purged" of moralistic conceit is shared by the elder Niebuhr.

¹⁷Ibid., p. xi.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 257.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 257.

the summum bonum is justice - the "equality of opportunity for all life"²⁰, whereas in terms of the perspective of the individual, the highest ideal is unselfishness. "These two moral perspectives are not mutually exclusive", Niebuhr writes, "and the contradiction between them is not absolute. But neither are they easily harmonized".²¹

In order to understand how justice - the harmonized balancing of conflicting interests - is the highest aim of human social life, it is necessary to see how Niebuhr grasped the brutal character of all human collectives. Niebuhr is critical of those who regard social conflict as merely an expedient of the moment. For Niebuhr, social conflict is of the very fabric of our social existence. The power of self-interest and egoism is actuated in all intergroup relations. And the moralists, in Niebuhr's view, fail to see that "the easy subservience of reason to prejudice and passion, and the consequent persistence of irrational egoism . . . make social conflict an inevitability in human history".²² Justice is that fluid process of calibrating rival claims or views in an attempt to come to some equilibrium in this conflict.

Insofar as we are "gifted and cursed" with an imagination which extends our desires beyond our needs, there are definite

²⁰Ibid., p. 258.

²¹Ibid., p. 257.

²²Ibid., p. xx.

limits to our capacity to grant to others that which we would claim for ourselves. Because the will-to-live is easily and often transmuted into the will-to-power (via the imagination), justice through voluntary co-operation, according to Niebuhr, is an illusion.²³ Niebuhr in Moral Man observes that social co-operation requires some form of external prodding: some measure of coercion or duress. The coercive factor, in fact, is never absent in a group (or community of groups):

(O)nly a romanticist of the purest water could maintain that a national group ever arrives at a "common mind" or becomes conscious of a "general will" without the use of either force or the threat of force.²⁴

Niebuhr notes that this is true both in the case of nations and in the case of other social groups. Despite the difficulties force may bring to human dynamics, Niebuhr's sympathy for a liberal pacifist stance withers as he comes to recognize that, because of the moral limitations of the human mind and because of our inability to fully transcend our own interests, force is an inevitable concomitant in the quest for social justice and social cohesion:

Tolstoian pacifists and other advocates of non-resistance, noting the evils which force introduces into society, give themselves to the vain illusion that it can be completely eliminated, and society organized upon the basis of anarchistic principles. Their conviction is an illusion, because there are definite limits of moral goodwill and social intelligence beyond which even the most vital religion and the most astute educational programme will not carry a social group, whatever may be possible for

²³Ibid., p. 3.

²⁴Ibid., p. 6.

individuals in an intimate society.²⁵

The line which Niebuhr draws above distinguishing between what is possible for an individual in an "intimate society", and what is possible for interaction between groups, is clear: From the viewpoint of the individual author of an action "unselfishness must remain the criterion of the highest morality"²⁶; human societies, on the other hand, make justice the highest good. And it is while actualizing this goal of equality of opportunity that human societies engage in the process of justice, a calibration and harmonization of rival claims which the individual conscience of the liberal pacifist finds untenable:

If this equality and justice cannot be achieved without the assertion of interest against interest, and without restraint upon the self-assertion of those who infringe upon the rights of their neighbors, then society is compelled to sanction self-assertion and restraint.²⁷

The liberal pacifist will distance himself from this procedure, according to Niebuhr, because it inevitably involves elements of coercion, duress, and even violence.

(T)he coercive factor in society is both necessary and dangerous . . . (it) seriously complicates the whole task of securing both peace and justice.²⁸

The liberal pacifist hope for arriving at just settlements of rival claims through peaceful, non-resisting means is naive, according to Niebuhr, because liberal pacifists do not understand

²⁵Ibid., p. 20.

²⁶Ibid., p. 258.

²⁷Ibid., p. 258f.

²⁸Ibid., p. 20.

the complexity of this task. Theirs is an idyllic vision limited by the bounds of the strictly individual sensibility.

It is safe to hazard the prophecy that the dream of perpetual peace and brotherhood for human society is one which will never be fully realized. It is a vision prompted by the conscience and insight of individual men, but incapable of fulfillment by collective man.²⁹

This dream is incapable of fulfillment by collective humanity because collectives, in the form of states and governments, cannot always be sacrificial. In his The Cycles of American History (1986), the historian Arthur J. Schlesinger, Jr., one of Niebuhr's most eminent interpreters, makes the point that the individual's duty to unselfishness, as Niebuhr has outlined above, and the collective's duty to self-preservation are in conflict. While the individual may be called upon to obey the law of love and sacrifice, collectives cannot be unselfish in the same way. The point is that governments are not individuals but (ostensibly) representatives of individuals. They are not principals but agents for their constituents. They are guarantors of the happiness and interests of others. Both Schlesinger and Niebuhr quote Hugh Cecil's argument with approval: "Unselfishness is inappropriate to the action of a state. No one has the right to be unselfish with other people's interests".³⁰ Niebuhr's point, echoed and developed somewhat by Schlesinger, is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to

²⁹Ibid., p. 21f.

³⁰Niebuhr, Moral Man, p. 267. Schlesinger, Arthur M., Jr., The Cycles of American History, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1986), p. 71.

measure the action of states, governments, or any other form of collective by a purely individualistic morality.

From the distinction between individual and collective moral perspectives, then, grow two distinct ethical realms which may be called the internal and external, or the religious and the political. We shall see that, according to Niebuhr, liberal pacifism is an option most properly confined to the internal or religious perspective, and it moves from this area of moral decision-making to the external or political sphere at great peril to the struggle for justice in the world.

The Religious and the Political Perspectives

In Niebuhr's view, the internal moral perspective is closely related to, and cultivated by, religion: "For religion proceeds from profound introspection and naturally makes good motives the criterion of good conduct". Religion may define good motives in terms of love or duty, Niebuhr goes on to write, "but the emphasis is upon the inner springs of action".³¹ The social or external moral perspective, on the other hand, "stands in sharpest contrast to religious morality".³² The external perspective has bearing on the behaviour of human collectives, rather than that of individual human beings living out their lives in intimate communities. It deals with the grim necessities of political life - where interest is balanced against interest. Political morality, according to Niebuhr,

³¹Niebuhr, Moral Man, p. 259.

³²Ibid., p. 259.

forms a most "uncompromising antithesis" to religious morality.³³

The highest ideal of individual moral life, noted earlier as unselfishness, usually takes the form of "inner restraint upon self-assertion", and the effort "to achieve complete disinterestedness".³⁴ But policies of action based on this and no other perspective can too easily become morbid, according to Niebuhr, and they may "make for injustice by encouraging and permitting undue self-assertion in others".³⁵ While the virtue of religious morality may be that it checks and modifies the egoistic impulses of the self, it runs the risk of bowing out of any part in responsibility for the state of affairs affecting all individuals. This is to deal with the beam in one's own eye to the exclusion of anything else. Religious morality, then, may perpetuate injustice by discouraging self-assertion against the inordinate claims of others. In this excerpt from a letter to Mahatma Gandhi, philosopher Martin Buber expresses frustration, even indignation, at Mahatma's suggestion that the Jews of Germany practice "satyagraha" or "soul-force" in the face of Nazi aggression:

Now do you know or do you not know, Mahatma, what a concentration camp is like and what goes on there? Do you know of the torments of slow and quick slaughter?

An effective stand may be taken in the form of non-violence against unfeeling human beings in the hope of

³³Ibid., p. 259.

³⁴Ibid., p. 261.

³⁵Ibid., p. 261f.

gradually bringing them thereby to their senses; but a diabolical universal steam-roller cannot thus be withstood. There is a certain situation in which from the "satyagraha" of the strength of spirit no "satyagraha" of the power of truth can result.³⁶

Niebuhr, I think, would sympathize with Buber here. The full force of the religious faith inherent in Gandhi's "satyagraha" is not immediately applicable or even helpful in the face of such unrepentant tyranny as that exercised by the Nazis.

(T)he full force of religious faith will never be available for the building of a just society, because its highest visions are those which proceed from the insights of a sensitive conscience. If they are realized at all, they will be realized in intimate religious communities, in which individual ideals achieve social realization but do not conquer society.³⁷

Niebuhr seems to be saying that the religious moral perspective can be a liability of indulgence in the struggle for justice in the world. If we make religious moral options such as pacifism operative at the level of group interaction, then difficulties, according to Niebuhr, are only compounded. No internal checks, in Niebuhr's view, are powerful enough to bring under control the egoism of the group: "The more the problem is shifted from the relations of individuals to the relations of groups and collectives, the more the preponderance of the egoistic impulses".³⁸ Hence the need for external, coercive checks.

Political morality is the best way of handling the moral

³⁶Buber, Martin, Pointing the Way, edited and translated by Maurice Friedman, (New York: Harper and Bros., 1957), p. 140f.

³⁷Niebuhr, Moral Man, p. 81.

³⁸Ibid., p. 262.

problem at the level of the collective, according to Niebuhr, because it attempts to establish social order and control through the balancing of egoistic impulses. The problem here, however, is that justice may be established at the cost of peace and apparent social harmony. While religious morality may perpetuate injustice by refusing even to glance at the mote in the brother's eye, political morality sanctions policies that would move too quickly and self-righteously to clear the dust from the brother's sight. Political morality may authorize not only self-assertion but the use of coercion - egoistic impulses - in reinforcing claims. The risk in this case, obviously, is the possible substitution of new forms of injustice for old ones - a new tyranny is placed on the throne of its predecessor.³⁹

"Pure religious idealism", Niebuhr writes, "makes disinterestedness an absolute without reference to social consequences", and the ideal is justified "in terms of the integrity and beauty of the human spirit".⁴⁰ The social consequences of attending to the needs of the human soul are far from pragmatic:

Jesus did not counsel his disciples to forgive seventy times seven in order that they might convert their enemies or make them more favourably disposed. He counselled it as an effort to approximate complete moral perfection, the perfection of God. He did not ask his followers to go the second mile in the hope that those who had impressed them into service would relent and give them freedom. He did not say that the enemy ought to be loved so that he would cease to be an enemy. He did not dwell on the social consequences

³⁹Ibid., p. 263.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 263.

of these moral actions, because he viewed them from an inner and a transcendent perspective.⁴¹

There is nothing particularly politically or pragmatically efficacious in Jesus' words here. Jesus' concern, rather, was for the inner, transcendent, even vertical, perspective of human existence. Dictates of the vertical perspective can and should be striven for, according to Niebuhr, but we should never expect them to be fully actualized in history. The perpetual brotherhood and sisterhood that are the hallmarks of the hope of liberal pacifism are truly religious visions, according to Niebuhr, and consequently they "are possible of approximation but not of realization".⁴² The horizontal perspective, where men and women are limited to dealing with what can be realized in history, is the dimension of humanity's social being.

Niebuhr was particularly fond of using spatial and mathematical symbols to describe the individual and social dimensions of human existence. In a sermon on Galatians, preached at Union Theological Seminary in April, 1967, he writes: "First there is the horizontal symbol which indicates the social substance of human existence and the social character of human existence: 'Bear one another's burdens' (Gal. 6:2)".⁴³ The vertical dimension, Niebuhr observes in the sermon, expresses

⁴¹Ibid., p. 263f.

⁴²Ibid., p. 21f.

⁴³Niebuhr, "The Burden of Conscience", in Justice and Mercy, U.M. Niebuhr, ed., (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1974), pp. 105-111. See also An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1935), p. 28.

our individual existence, where "each man will have to bear his own load" (Gal. 6:5). The horizontal dimension of our existence has to do with power: the capacity of each participant in a situation to impose his or her will on the environment, whether by economic, military, or psychological pressures. It is through calibrating this power appropriately that we are in a position to bear each others burdens, and to ameliorate difficult social situations, or - as often happens - worsen them through selfishness.

Movement along the horizontal co-ordinate measures coercive capability and, as such, has no ethical content in and of itself. The vertical dimension, on the other hand, indicates the ethical demands of the law of love and sacrifice - it has no pragmatic content in and of itself. The whole point, if we are to understand Niebuhr correctly, seems to be to move across the graph diagonally, taking into account the dimension of force and the dimension of justice, while not confusing them:

To the sensitive spirit, society must always remain something of the jungle, which indeed it is, something of the world of nature, which might be brought a little nearer the Kingdom of God, if only the sensitive spirit could learn how to use the forces of nature to defeat nature, how to use force in order to establish justice.⁴⁴

But, instead, knowing the dangers the use of force or coercion brings to social harmony, the "sensitive spirit" (one could also write "liberal pacifist" here) withdraws from the power-ethics continuum altogether, calling only for a unified peaceful world.

⁴⁴Niebuhr, Moral Man, p. 81.

To traverse unidimensionally along this continuum is ultimately self-defeating: Undue concern with religious ethical values to the exclusion of any pragmatic activity in the dimension of power and influence is to abdicate responsibility for the shaping of the course of affairs. By the same token, however, to be concerned with gaining nothing by power, without attending to the ethical and spiritual aims this power may serve, is to take the self-destructive route of utter cynicism. "All through history one may observe", writes Niebuhr, "the tendency of power to destroy its very raison d'etre".⁴⁵ And when power is stripped of the "shining armour" of religious or philosophical moral theories by which it is rationalized, Niebuhr observes, it is more vulnerable to eventual collapse.⁴⁶ Without some kind of moral or religious sanction for one's power, in other words, one's tyranny will soon collapse at the hands of an indignant and alienated world.⁴⁷

The problem with the liberalism of the 1930's, according to Niebuhr, is that it confuses these two dimensions - those of religious morality and of political morality - a mistake which issues in a naive and sentimental approach to the hard questions of living in a world of sinners organized into sovereign states. The pacifism integral to the liberal social agenda at this time,

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 11.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 33.

⁴⁷For an elaboration of this point, see Sir Michael Howard's The Causes of Wars, second edition, enlarged, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 113ff.

in Niebuhr's view, is merely symptomatic of this confusion.

Niebuhr raises the question of pacifism again in a slightly different context in his An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935). In this text he examines the tension between the Christian law of love on the one hand, and violence on the other, in the search for a just property system. He fleshes out this tension in terms of two novel polarities: the "absolutism" of the ethical ideal of love, and the pragmatic "relativism" involved in the sometimes murky quest for social justice. We shall see that throughout the 1930's Niebuhr continues to take issue with the liberal tendency to confuse and enmesh these two perspectives in naive efforts to arrive at some comprehensive vision for world peace.

V: The Debate Encounters Nazi Aggression (1932-1940)

The ethic of Jesus, when it comes to the question of violence is, in Niebuhr's view, rather a question of "passive-ism": "If Christians are to live by the 'way of the Cross' they ought to practice non-resistance", not non-violent resistance.¹ In fact, Niebuhr asserts, the Christian's anxiety over violating the ethic of Jesus ought to begin long before the question of violence is even reached. Such concern "ought to begin by recognizing that he (the Christian) has violated the law, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself'".² For Niebuhr, questions as to whether or not to hit the fellow who has just hit you are clearly secondary to the fact that it is difficult enough merely to be civil to him, let alone love him as Jesus would have us do. According to Niebuhr, it is out of the violation of this commandment, and not the violation of "resist not evil" (Matthew 5:39), that there arises the conflict of life with life, and that of nation with nation.

If one understands with Niebuhr that the violation of Jesus' ethic regarding our neighborly posture has begun early on, with our falling miserably short of loving our neighbor as ourselves, then the perfectionist or absolutist assertion of the pacifist seems untimely, as if having come out of nowhere. And this while appealing to a certain basic moral instinct, may be dangerous:

¹Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, p. 114.

²Niebuhr, Christian Ethics, p. 114.

"Sometimes", Niebuhr writes, "the sudden introduction of a perfectionist ethic into hitherto pragmatic and relative political issues may actually imperil the interests of justice".³ Niebuhr, obviously, is wary of the fanaticism which religious absolutism breeds. His point is that we cannot expect to live in and benefit from a society in which coercive and exploitative economic and political relations are taken for granted - all of which, again, fall short of the absolutism of the law of love - and arbitrarily introduce the uncompromising ethic of the gospel into one particular issue. "When this is done", Niebuhr suggests wryly, "we may be fairly certain that unconscious class prejudices partly prompt the supposedly Christian judgement".⁴ In his "Critique of Pacifism" (discussed earlier), Niebuhr was more caustic around what he means by "class prejudices":

There are Continental cynics and shrewd observers in other parts of the world who slyly suggest that pacifism is a virtue which only the two great Anglo-Saxon nations are able to enjoy. The implication is that England and America are the only two solvent nations in the world, and that, since they have what they want and need, it is to their interest to preach peace.⁵

And with these cynics, Niebuhr himself dryly suggests that it is always the tendency of the who have to sing the virtues of peace and order - placing those who have not at an apparent moral

³Ibid., p. 114.

⁴Ibid., p. 114.

⁵Niebuhr, "A Critique of Pacifism", Atlantic, May 1927, p. 640.

disadvantage.

It is no better, according to Niebuhr, to attempt to take the moral high ground by extolling the virtues of non-violent resistance over more coercive measures. The differences between non-violent and violent resistance are significant, he argues in Moral Man, but "it is necessary to emphasize the similarities and to insist that non-violence does coerce and destroy".⁶ Niebuhr's point is that non-resistance should not be confused with non-violent resistance, nor should the latter be considered "more spiritual" than violent resistance:

A negative form of resistance does not achieve spirituality simply because it is negative. As long as it enters the field of social and physical relations and places physical restraints upon the desires and activities of others, it is a form of physical coercion.⁷

In support of this claim, Niebuhr makes the sober observation that "the cotton spinners of Lancashire are impoverished by Gandhi's boycott of English cotton, though they can hardly be regarded as the authors of British imperialism".⁸ Even economic sanctions, a classic form of non-violent resistance, have destructive consequences: "If the League of Nations should use economic sanctions against Japan, or any other nation, workmen who have the least to do with Japanese imperialism would be bound

⁶Niebuhr, Moral Man, p. 241.

⁷Ibid., p. 242.

⁸Ibid., p. 241.

to suffer most from such a discipline".⁹ The chief distinction between violence and non-violence is not, according to Niebuhr, in the degree of destruction they can cause - both are effective destructive measures. We may distinguish between them only on the basis of the aggressive character of one, and the passive character of the other.¹⁰ The advantage of non-violence, if there is one, is that it protects both parties against the vitriolic resentment which inevitably ensues if violent measures are taken, resentment which serves only to fuel the fires of conflict. Non-violent measures, according to Niebuhr, are more tolerable, if only because they prolong a more muted destructiveness. It is important to note here how Niebuhr identifies the pragmatic consequences of what is usually considered the more "moral" alternative. Pacifism, and even non-violent resistance, have political (and therefore relative and pragmatic) dimensions for Niebuhr, and he is suspect of the perfectionist, non-resisting stance because of this.

In An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, published in 1935, Niebuhr again targets the mainstream liberalism of his day as the source of a serious moral confusion of the political and religious perspectives:

The principal defect of the liberal Christian thought on the question of violence is that it confuses two perspectives on the problem, the pragmatic and the perfectionist oneMoral confusion results from

⁹Ibid., p. 241.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 240.

efforts to compound them.¹¹

Niebuhr is at odds with the liberal emphasis, in both Christian and secular circles, on pacifism and its tendency to obscure the boundary between two distinct arenas of human endeavour: the religious-perfectionist and the relative-political. At best, Niebuhr sees them as distinct but complementary categories; at worst, they are mutually exclusive. The absolutist arena is the realm of impossible ethical ideals. The other pole of this dualism - the relative-political - is the realm of human decision-making in human history.

Perhaps the notion of a "dualism" is too strong for Niebuhr's thought on this point. What he does envision, in the least, is a tension, a paradoxical relation between the two spheres of human life. Niebuhr sees impossible ethical ideals as involved in every moral aspiration and achievement:

(E)very moral value and standard is grounded in and points toward an ultimate perfection of unity and harmony, not realizable in any historic situation.¹²

In the area of moral endeavour, then, the ideal functions not only as inspiration and goal but, by virtue of our being unable to fully realize this ideal, as criticism and judgement as well. This is why Niebuhr's concept of justice must always be thought of in dynamic terms. Love, as an impossible ethical ideal, can always raise justice to new heights. For Niebuhr, the possibilities of transforming the fluid structures of justice

¹¹Niebuhr, Christian Ethics, p. 113f.

¹²Ibid., p. 64.

through love are indeterminate - one's conscience can always be sensitized further by the ethical ideal. Nevertheless, neither love nor any other form of ethical perfection can ever take the place of justice, even under the best of conditions.¹³ Speaking of "prophetic" as opposed to "liberal" Christianity, Niebuhr notes:

Prophetic Christianity . . . demands the impossible; and by that very demand emphasizes the impotence and corruption of human nature, wresting from man the cry of distress and contrition, 'The good that I would do, I do not: but the evil that I would not, that I do . . .'.¹⁴

The more transcendent the ideal or source of unity and harmony, the more inspiring and, at the same time, impossible it becomes to concretize it. The situation for the Christian, for instance, is doubly difficult because the obligation is not towards some moral ideal, but the loving will of God, and therefore toward a more transcendent source of unity and harmony than any discoverable in the natural world "where men are always divided by various forces of nature and history".¹⁵ The Christian, in Niebuhr's mind, is both highly exhorted and encouraged on the one hand, and highly accountable on the other. The demand for the impossible from us human beings emphasizes not some inchoate capacity to achieve this ideal, as some of Niebuhr's liberal

¹³For the basis of these remarks, see "Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethics", an article by John C. Bennett, in Kegley and Bretall, Reinhold Niebuhr; His Religious, Social, and Political Thought, (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1956) p. 59ff.

¹⁴Niebuhr, Christian Ethics, p. 62.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 69.

contemporaries might have wished, but the very fact that we never can:

The faith which regards the love commandment as a simple possibility rather than an impossible possibility is rooted in a faulty analysis of human nature which fails to understand that though man always stands under infinite possibilities and is potentially related to the totality of existence, he is, nevertheless, and will remain, a creature of finiteness.¹⁶

In this sense, for Niebuhr, an impossible ethical ideal is relevant to the moral endeavour in the manner of judgement, always reminding us of our finiteness - how we come up short of the mark.

Niebuhr sees this element of judgement sorely lacking in the pacifism of his liberal colleagues. Liberal pacifism is fatuous, for Niebuhr, because it is religious absolutism - an impossible ethical ideal - pretending to be a viable political alternative in a world more full of weeping than we can understand, and where all political alternatives involve us in the ambiguities of sin and guilt. He particularly vilifies such liberal absolutism during World War II:

If Hitler is defeated in the end it will be because the crisis has awakened in us the will to preserve a civilization in which justice and freedom are realities, and given us the knowledge that ambiguous methods are required for the ambiguities of history. Let those who are revolted by such ambiguities have the decency and consistency to retire to the monastery, where medieval perfectionists found their asylum.¹⁷

¹⁶Ibid., p. 72.

¹⁷Niebuhr, Christianity and Power Politics, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), p. 174f.

The liberal pacifists, according to Niebuhr, promulgate their strategy without cognizance of the fact that all of humanity is in constant violation of the law of love, and that the variations on this violation are manifold. This fact alone, that we are ever and again sinners, means for Niebuhr that political choices must be made on relative, and not absolutist or perfectionist grounds.

Liberal pacifism fails, in Niebuhr's view, because it cannot make real distinctions in the real world. And this kind of naive absolutism has dire consequences. In 1940, Niebuhr wrote that the pacifists would be forced either to condone Nazi tyranny for the sake of avoiding war, or withdraw from any commerce with the political contingencies at hand.¹⁸ In his famous piece "Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist" (1940), he suggests that liberal pacifists run the risk of finding Nazi tyranny no better or worse than the imperialisms practiced by various democratic nations. Niebuhr shows little patience for such a position:

Whatever may be the moral ambiguities of the so-called democratic nations, and however serious may be their failure to conform perfectly to their democratic ideals, it is sheer moral perversity to equate the inconsistencies of a democratic civilization with the brutalities which modern tyrannical states practice.¹⁹

For Niebuhr, the idea that democratic nations must wait until the smudge of imperialism has disappeared from their own motives before taking up arms against the Nazis is absurd. Certainly

¹⁸Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist", in Essential, p. 110.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 110f.

Niebuhr is able to recognize, with the pacifists, that armed conflict rationalized by questionable motives and perhaps, in the end, imperialistic is evil. Yet, for Niebuhr, war with the Nazis is less evil than acquiescence to their own brand of brutal and unrelenting tyranny.

In Niebuhr's scheme of things no nation is completely free of the guilt of imperialism, and it is pointless, therefore, to insist that we act in history only on the condition that we are somehow guiltless. Since we are all more or less guilty of falling short of the law of love all of the time, we are left facing, in Niebuhr's view, a difficult decision: having to choose amongst our various imperialisms, weighing the relative merits and shortcomings of one against the other. The operative word here is "relative". In this world "there is no moral value which may be regarded as absolute".²⁰ In Moral Man, Niebuhr states unequivocally that "every action resolves a certain competition between values, in which one value must be subordinated to another".²¹ This process of evaluating values and resolving the "conflict of virtues" is, for Niebuhr, the working out of justice in the world; it accounts for the fluidity of his concept of justice.

Roland Bainton's interpretation of Niebuhr on this point merits our attention. Writing of the climate of the discussion of the pacifist question just as World War II was getting

²⁰Niebuhr, Moral Man, p. 174.

²¹Ibid., p. 174.

underway, Bainton states:

Granted that all were tainted with sin, that all stood in need of repentance, nevertheless there were still relative rights and relative wrongs To be sure, the war might not establish democracy, liberty, and a just and enduring peace. The only thing war can ever do is to restrain outrageous villainy and give a chance to build again. A victory of the Allies would ensure none of the ideal ends which Christians entertained, but a victory for the Axis would preclude them.²²

Liberal pacifism, for Niebuhr, is a form of "simple Christian moralism", senseless because of its uncritical refusal to make distinctions between relative values in history. Theologically, this refusal is grounded in a re-interpretation of the Gospel in terms of the "Renaissance faith in man" - a faith which ignores the persistence of sin on every level of human moral endeavour. This theological error, which we shall take up in the next section of our discussion, tempts us either to make no historical choices at all, thereby forcing us to eschew the social/political dimension of human existence altogether, or to give undue preference to tyranny over the anarchy of war which is necessary to overcome tyranny. In either case, Niebuhr is critical of liberal pacifism's refusal to come to terms with the reality of power in the world, and the "nastiness" of its use in some quarters of the globe.²³ Liberal pacifism is a form of religious absolutism that has a blind spot where most non-pacifists have come to recognize "the obvious facts of human

²²Bainton, Roland, Christian Attitudes Towards War and Peace, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960), p. 220.

²³See Sir Michael Howard's remarks in "Realities" transcripts (TV Ontario), pages unnumbered.

experience in every realm and on every level of moral
goodness".²⁴

²⁴Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church is not Pacifist",
Essential, p. 111.

VI: Niebuhr's Assessment of the Theology of Liberal Pacifism

The fact that Christianity is a framework of meaning with the triune Christian God at its core is without question. Herewith we shall consider the root of Niebuhr's theological criticism of liberal pacifism which is directed to just this point. Put succinctly, it is Niebuhr's contention that liberal pacifism has misplaced its faith. According to Niebuhr, it is not the triune God that is found at the core of the liberal pacifist framework of meaning, but "man", including some serious misconceptions about the nature of humanity. Our text for this portion of the discussion is Niebuhr's most famous piece arguing against pacifism in the Church: "Why the Christian Church is not Pacifist", first published in the collection of essays, Christianity and Power Politics (1940), and again published in Robert McAfee Brown's The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr (1986).

Niebuhr believes that liberal pacifism substitutes faith in humanity - the perfectibility of the human species - for faith in God:

(M)ost modern forms of Christian pacifism are heretical. Presumably inspired by the Christian gospel, they have really absorbed the Renaissance faith in the goodness of man, have rejected the Christian doctrine of original sin as an outmoded bit of pessimism, have reinterpreted the cross so that it is made to stand for the absurd idea that perfect love is guaranteed a simple victory over the world, and have rejected all other profound elements of the Christian gospel as 'Pauline' accretions which must be stripped from the 'simple gospel of Jesus'.¹

¹Niebuhr, Essential, p. 104.

This pacifism is heretical for Niebuhr on two grounds: First, as outlined above, when judged by the standards of what Niebuhr calls the "total gospel" the tenets of liberal pacifism are found to be lacking. The liberal pacifist framework is found to be similarly lacking when judged by the basic facts of human experience: "There are no historical realities which remotely conform to it. It is important to recognize this lack of conformity to the facts of experience as a criterion of heresy".² The faith of the liberal pacifist, according to Niebuhr, cannot finally validate itself in our experience, as all "vital faiths" must do:

No religious faith can maintain itself in defiance of the experience which it supposedly interprets
If we believe that the only reason men do not love each other is because the law of love has not been preached persuasively enough, we believe something to which experience does not conform.³

One cannot simply marginalize the Christian doctrine of original sin, according to Niebuhr, and absorb, instead, the "Renaissance faith" in the goodness of humanity, without running up against some serious common sense facts derived from our experience as human beings, most of which correspond deeply to the insights at the heart of the doctrine of original sin.

Niebuhr sees in the pacifist vision the attempt to abstract from the finite, contingent, and sinful human being that which is rational and universal, and the subsequent effort, through

²Ibid., p. 104f.

³Ibid., p. 105.

education, to foster and develop this element. According to Niebuhr, liberal pacifists hold to the understanding that "if you can only cultivate some mystic-universal element in the deeper levels of man's consciousness, you will be able to eliminate human selfishness and the consequent conflict of life with life".⁴ This view, in Niebuhr's mind, conforms neither to the New Testament view of human nature, nor to human experience. It is Niebuhr's support for this critical observation and particularly his discussion of the tension between righteousness and mercy, obscured by the liberal pacifist vision, that we will now consider.

The liberal pacifist stance falters, according to Niebuhr, because it is based upon a theology which fails to come to grips with the tragic factor of sin in the history of human affairs. In Niebuhr's view, liberal pacifism's treatment of the relationship between righteousness and God's mercy is too cavalier - it obscures the tension between sanctification on the one hand, and justification on the other.

What this really boils down to, in Niebuhr's mind, is an oversimplification of the relation between human sin and God's grace. Grace is understood primarily as a power of righteousness which so heals the sinful heart that the fulfillment of the law of love and sacrifice ("love thy neighbor as thyself") is considered an historical possibility. Many Christians are familiar with St. Paul's famous dictum: "I am

⁴Ibid., p. 105.

crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live, yet it is no more that I live but Christ that dwelleth in me" (Gal. 2:20). For Niebuhr, this declaration is not without ambiguity:

Did he mean that the new life in Christ was not his own by reason of the fact that grace, rather than his own power, enabled him to live on the new level of righteousness? Or did he mean that the new life was his only in intention and by reason of God's willingness to accept intention for achievement?⁵

Was Paul's emphasis, in other words, upon actually living on a new level of righteousness so that one is essentially "sanctified" and sins no more? Or do we go on being sinful human beings but, by virtue of God's justification of us through Christ (his willingness to accept intention for achievement) we are forgiven again and again for our sins? Sanctification leads one to "moral peace", according to Niebuhr, whereby one feels the certainty of having "become what man truly is". Justification, on the other hand, leads one to the "religious peace" of being "completely known and all forgiven".⁶ In Niebuhr's view, liberal pacifism places too much emphasis on the moral peace of the grace of Christ.

There is indeed a moral aspect to the peace which "passeth all understanding". For Niebuhr, however, "there is never such perfect moral content in it that any man could find perfect peace through his moral achievements, not even the achievements he

⁵Ibid., p. 111f.

⁶Ibid., p. 112.

attributes to grace rather than the power of his own will".⁷ For Niebuhr, to think in terms of somehow actualizing this moral perfection is indicative of a naive hubris - leave the perfection of the Kingdom of God to God, Niebuhr would say on this point, it is not a simple matter of historical possibility:

The ultimate principles of the Kingdom of God are never irrelevant to any problem of justice, and they hover over every social situation as an ideal possibility; but that does not mean that they can be made into simple alternatives for the present schemes of relative justice.⁸

Niebuhr's argument here is that there is room, in the Reformation emphasis on justification by faith, for the complex facts of our existence which are comprised of distances, even contradictions, between ideals and achievements. Liberal pacifist assumptions follow from illusions about human nature, and its relation to God's grace, in which these distances are closed, and the contradictions miraculously obscured. It is clear from he says directly above that Niebuhr believes the ethic of Jesus stands over us in the manner of an impossible ethical ideal. The fact that Jesus' ethic is ultimately normative, then, does not necessarily mean that it is immediately and unqualifiedly applicable to the task of securing justice in the world. We may further surmise from Niebuhr's remarks on this that Jesus does not sanction the efforts and action required to put down a tyrant like Hitler. Rather, Jesus suffers the tragic fact that

⁷Ibid., p. 112.

⁸Ibid., p. 115.

ambiguous methods are required for the ambiguities of history.

In addition to this, Niebuhr argues that the liberal pacifists have reinterpreted the Cross "so that it is made to stand for the absurd idea that perfect love is guaranteed a simple victory over the world".⁹ By now it should be clear that, for Niebuhr, this simply does not make sense. Perfect love such as that symbolized by the Cross of Christ follows the way of Christ - unto death; perfect love is crushed amidst the ambiguities and relativities and violence of a sinful world. As Bainton notes:

To suppose that the patient endurance of evil would soften the heart of the wolf was sheer nonsense. To talk of influencing history by bearing the cross was to forget that the crucified is blotted out of the historical process.¹⁰

The Cross of Christ, according to Niebuhr, provides us not with some sort of power to overcome the contradictions of history. Rather, it is a revelation of mercy for and in a tragic world. If the liberal pacifist wishes to take his stand on absolute grounds, then he is on logically impregnable ground. But he should not, in Niebuhr's mind, pretend to be a contributor to the determination of history. Above all, he should not claim "the way of the Cross" as sanction for his position (thereby putting non-pacifists in an apparent moral disadvantage) when by his very abstention from the struggle he is not so much bearing it as

⁹Ibid., p. 104.

¹⁰Bainton, Christian Attitudes, p. 220.

sloughing off onto the shoulders of others.¹¹

¹¹Again, Bainton makes this point in his erudite interpretation of Niebuhr in Christian Attitudes, p. 220.

Summary and Conclusions

At this point in the discussion it may be timely to take up a summary of Niebuhr's criticism of pacifism, the roots of which lay in the broader political and religious framework of liberalism in 20th century North America. In the fourth chapter of the discussion I outlined Niebuhr's development of the distinction between individual and collective morality. We saw that while liberal pacifism could be identified as an imperative for the individual conscience, human society as a collective engages in a "balancing act" of such consciences and their claims. Society, in Niebuhr's view, finds itself in the position of having to weigh rival and conflicting goods with the aim of arriving at some sort of reasonable approximation of a just set of social relations. In this political process, policies which a purely individualistic ethic finds untenable are justified and necessitated on relative grounds. In terms of international relations, that is, the relations between collectives, we came to understand how the individual's obligation toward unselfishness and the collective's duty to self-preservation are virtues in irresolvable conflict with each other.

We may recall that, according to Niebuhr, it is perhaps possible to approximate the law of love - the imperative that we affirm the life and interests of the neighbor as much as those of the self - at the level of in the individual; but it presents grave difficulties at the level of the collective. In a

particularly striking passage from his Moral Man and Immoral Society, Niebuhr writes:

Individuals may aspire to the absolute with more justification and less peril than societies. If the price which they must pay is high, the probable futility of the effort involves only their own losses. And the sense of noble tragedy may compensate for the defeat. But societies risk the welfare of millions when they gamble for the attainment of the absolute. And since coercion is an invariable instrument of their policy, absolutism transmutes this instrument into unbearable tyrannies and cruelties.¹

Liberal pacifism is fatuous as a policy for the government of collectives and international relations between them because of its pretending to be a viable political (and therefore relative) option, when it is, in actuality, a form of religious absolutism that has no place in the ambiguities of history. Ambiguous methods of achieving true justice are required in ambiguous times. And human history is full of such crucial moments. Non-resistance, far from the relativism which a political ethic implies, smacks of fanaticism. In the end the fanaticism of the individual may appear noble, harmless, even pathetic, but when it manifests itself in the form of political policies it "shuts the gates of mercy of mankind".²

Niebuhr is willing to allow that human life may be informed with an inchoate "sense of responsibility" toward the absolute law of love. But this sense of responsibility is not enough to realize a perfectly just set of relations in history, especially

¹Niebuhr, Moral Man, p. 199.

²Ibid., p. 199.

amongst international relations with "enemies". The question of pacifism is an issue which, for Niebuhr, is wrought with collective dimensions and implications. It turns, for him, on the idea that the difference between our own moral stature and that of our so-called "enemy" is not so easily distinguishable as we would please. The ethic of genuine love and forgiveness which Jesus Christ calls us to requires not only that we comfort our afflictions by pointing out the sinfulness of those whom we fear and hate, but also that we afflict the comfortable in our own ranks by admitting our own sinfulness. The way in which Jesus' ethic approaches the question of conflict resolution presupposes the cognizance of a certain mutuality or universality of moral failure and guilt. In Niebuhr's view, such spiritual insight and humility is well beyond the capacities of human beings living and acting collectively. Writing on the diplomatic tension, if not hostility, between France and Germany in the 1930's, Niebuhr comments:

National animosities might be appeased if nations could hear the accusing word, 'Let him who is without sin cast the first stone'. Only a forgiving love, grounded in repentance, is adequate to heal the animosities between nations. It is a very rare achievement among individuals, and the mind and heart of collective man is notoriously less imaginative than that of the individual.³

That liberal pacifism with its emphasis on non-resistance represents an option for the moral endeavours of the individual is, for Niebuhr, an open question; for nations and states,

³Niebuhr, Christian Ethics, p. 79.

it is an impossible ideal.

We learned, finally, from Niebuhr's theological assessment that liberal pacifist assumptions follow from illusions about human nature which disregard the spiritual and psychological insights of the Christian doctrine of original sin and the Reformation doctrinal emphasis on justification by faith. These two theological formulations express a fundamental truth about human social existence: namely, that there are contradictions in history between ideals and human attempts to concretize these ideals. God's grace is here understood as the acceptance of our intention for achievement, not as some power with which to gloss over the ambiguities of history, or to overcome its contradictions. For Niebuhr, the Christ-event promises no escape from the conflicts and perplexities of history. Rather, it symbolizes the very suffering of such conflicts in the form of the ongoing and vital tension between the absolute and the realizable relative good.

In the summer of 1940, Niebuhr published "An Open Letter to Richard Roberts" in Christianity and Society. Roberts, a pacifist Presbyterian clergyman and co-founder of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, was originally from England, but lived and wrote for most of his life in Canada. By the time he assumed the pulpit of the American Presbyterian Church in Montreal in 1922, he was one of the leading pacifists of his day, and one whom

Niebuhr sincerely respected.⁴ Niebuhr's letter to him draws together in a single epistle some of the most noteworthy threads of argument and thought we have been tracing in this discussion.

It is clear from his arguments in Moral Man published eight years earlier that Niebuhr is critical of those who, like Roberts, regard social conflict as a anomalous and unfortunate expedient of the moment.⁵ Niebuhr himself proceeds from the contrary assumption, grounded in experience, that conflict is a concomitant of human existence. He echoes this point when writing to Roberts:

I do not believe that war is merely an incident in history but is a final revelation of the very character of human history.

I believe that an international crisis reveals in its most vivid form what human history is like and I accuse pacifists of not being aware of this character until it is vividly revealed.⁶

For Niebuhr, egoism - where the will-to-live blurs into the will-to-power - is a basic element and motive force of human nature and history. Ignorance of this abiding character of human history and the political order contributes to a most serious

⁴For an excellent account of Roberts' involvement with pacifism in Canada, see Witness Against War; Pacifism in Canada: 1900-1945, by Thomas P. Socknat, p. 100, 223ff.

⁵See Niebuhr, Moral Man, p. xix: "It is rather discouraging to find such naive confidence in the moral capacities of collective man, among men who make it their business to study collective human behaviour . . . They regard social conflict as only an expedient of the moment 'until broader principles of education and co-operation can be established'".

⁶Niebuhr, "An Open Letter to Richard Roberts", Christianity and Society, Vol. 5, Summer 1940, p. 30.

deficiency in modern self-understanding: "Most of the pacifism I know is deficient in the 'tragic sense of life'".⁷ It is this notion of the tragic sense of life which I think sets apart Niebuhr's thought on pacifism and other theological and political considerations.

Niebuhr demonstrates throughout his writing a keen awareness of antinomies and polarities of life which cannot be brought into some simple inclusive harmony. In Faith and History (1949), he quotes historian Herodotus with approval: "Of all sorrows which afflict mankind the bitterest is this, than one should have consciousness of much but control over nothing".⁸ The tension between consciousness of the challenge provided by ideals, and our inherently limited capacity to actualize them is one of the core "open questions" which in Niebuhr's worthy hands begins to articulate the tragic sense of life for the modern mind.

The dysfunction of consciousness and control at work in the heart of every individual, and augmented by sin, translates onto the international level in the form of tensions between knowledge or awareness of an ideal resolution to a crisis (dictated, for the Christian, by the law of love or the Sermon on the Mount), and the truly realistic "reachable" compromise and balance of relatively undesirable alternatives. In this regard, Niebuhr writes of the "inner life of statesmen, who find themselves torn

⁷Ibid., p.30.

⁸From Niebuhr, Faith and History, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), p. 155.

between the necessities of statecraft and the sometimes sensitive promptings of an individual conscience".⁹ The necessities of statecraft have clear implications for what is reachable and possible in the social and political sphere. The individual conscience, however, plagues the thoughtful statesman with "crazy" ideas of love, altruism, honesty, and sacrifice. For Niebuhr conflict between the virtue of being responsible to the political and social sphere, and that of being responsible to God and the dictates of his kingdom, is inescapable.

For Niebuhr, the incarnation of Christ promises no escape from history as conflict. The redemption offered in the Christ-event is a revelation of mercy, God's empathy for our history, rather than a power to overcome its contradictions. War and conflict, personal and social, are not mere incidents in human history. They are, rather, phenomena which reveal the tragic character of all human existence.¹⁰

Niebuhr is an exemplary spokesperson for the tragic sense of modern life borne of a consciousness of the variety and heterogeneity of human goods. "However much human ingenuity may increase the treasures which nature provides for the satisfaction of human needs", he writes in the first paragraph of Moral Man, "they can never be sufficient to satisfy all human wants; for man, unlike all other creatures, is gifted and cursed with an

⁹Niebuhr, Moral Man, p. 105.

¹⁰I am indebted to Ronald Stone's interpretation of Niebuhr here. See Stone, Reinhold Niebuhr, Prophet to Politicians, (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981), p. 17.

imagination which extends his appetites beyond the requirements of subsistence".¹¹ We desire, and are capable of conceiving, a society in which peace and justice are correlated in harmony. For Niebuhr, our situation is tragic in that we must recognize the authority due to both peace and justice, the claims of which may appear at times to be sharply at odds with one another.

As with all Christian believers, Niebuhr affirmed an objective moral order centred in the triune Christian God. But, he said, we see through a glass darkly: our perception of this order is such that we cannot bring the rival truths of peace and just social relations into complete harmony with each other.¹² And by choosing peace over justice, or vice versa, we do not exempt ourselves from sinning. For to choose peace and thereby perpetuate certain forms of status quo injustice does not absolve us from the authority of the claim that God's justice has over us. We choose this over that. We are, therefore, involved in sin. And we ask forgiveness for the mixture of conceit, narrow-mindedness, and selfishness that brought us to this decision. But, in Niebuhr's view, we do not forgo making the decision, which is what so many liberal pacifist would have us do. Niebuhr says to Richard Roberts: "You are willing to slightly favour the

¹¹Niebuhr, Moral Man, p. 1.

¹²"Seeing through a glass darkly" was one of Niebuhr's favourite biblical images. See "We See Through a Glass Darkly", a sermon preached at St. George's Church, New York, January 17, 1960, published in Justice and Mercy, pp. 29-37. See also Niebuhr's essay, "Mystery and Meaning", in Essential, pp. 237-249.

Allies against Hitler, but you are not willing to allow such a discrimination to result in action in favour of one side against the other".¹³ To allow such action is for the liberal pacifist to involve himself in sin. Roberts' difficulty, according to Niebuhr, is that he wants to live in history without sinning. Niebuhr's point is that "there is no such possibility in history".¹⁴

When faced with international crises such as the civil war in Spain, the Sino-Japanese War, and Nazi aggression, those who espouse Christianity encounter a dilemma: The Christian's commitment to non-violence is in danger of being compromised by his or her commitment to social justice. Niebuhr was gripped deeply by this dilemma. He understood the opposition to the use of violence and participation in any war, yet he grasped completely the sacrifices necessary to achieve what measure of social justice is due to our common humanity.

At the outset of this discussion I raised the issue of the variation of interpretation of Niebuhr's thought. It is obvious that, whatever their differences, both Novak and McAfee Brown find in Niebuhr's thought perspectives and observations which correlate to and support their own particular views. This variation, if not disparity, of interpretation raises the

¹³Niebuhr, "An Open Letter to Richard Roberts", Christianity and Society, Vol. 5, Summer 1940, p. 31.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 31.

following question: Does the fact that Niebuhr's legacy includes such divergent positions as those of Novak and McAfee Brown indicate the presence of serious inconsistencies or contradictions in the body of his work?

When I began my study of Niebuhr I was very confused. I had read both Novak and McAfee Brown (and other "Niebuhrians" such as Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. and Richard Harries) before reading Niebuhr. I found it rather daunting that since his death in 1971 Niebuhr had been labelled both a conservative "apologist of power" and as a left-leaning critic of the establishment (the so-called "prophet to politicians"). What I have learned by having actually studied Niebuhr's relation with 20th century liberal and pacifist thought is that Niebuhr was, to use the Algonquin word, a "mugwump".

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines "mugwump" as a "great man; one who holds aloof from party politics; one who sits on the fence". Far from disparaging, the Algonquin Indians used this word to describe a man of great wisdom and distinction; for them it was "mugquomp", meaning "great chief". I have learned that Niebuhr's work is such that it can be embraced fully neither by the 19th century liberalism of the neo-conservatives, nor by the 20th century liberalism of North American socialism. In fact, if I were to be forced to attach a label to Niebuhr's brilliance it would be the mark of a distinctly Canadian species: the Red Tory.

In the 1960's Canadian political scientist Gad Horowitz

identified the Red Tory in his tracing of the affinities between Canadian conservatives and socialists:

The tory and socialist minds have some crucial assumptions, orientations, and values in common, so that from a certain angle they may appear not as enemies but as two different expressions of the same basic ideological outlook. Thus, at the very highest level, the red tory is a philosopher who combines elements of toryism and socialism so thoroughly in a single integrated Weltanschauung that it is impossible to say that he is a proponent of either one as against the other.¹⁵

If we locate Novak on the right wing of the political spectrum and McAfee Brown on the left, Niebuhr, I think, is best placed somewhere close to the middle - giving voice to a perspective which incorporates elements of both the left and the right without contradiction.

On the issue of pacifism, we have seen Niebuhr is not much concerned with the traditional conservative emphasis on the nature of institutions, the laws of their proper functioning, and their protection. Niebuhr's modus vivendi, rather, is his overarching concern with the ways in which a transcendent moral law, grounded in the person of Jesus Christ, operates in persons on various levels of class and community. This practical and theological approach places Niebuhr firmly in a context of faith, and frees him from the constraints of allegiance to any partisan political stance. This, in effect, allows him to incorporate into his own vision insights from all corners of the political

¹⁵Gad Horowitz, as quoted by Charles Taylor, in Radical Tories; The Conservative Tradition in Canada, (Halifax: Formac Publishing, 1982), p. 114f.

spectrum.

With those who see pacifism as a political stance or strategy, for instance, Niebuhr may agree that non-resistance is an option for the individual and the scope of individual relations. Niebuhr even goes so far as to write in appreciation of the witness of pacifist Christian sects such as the Mennonites who have withdrawn from the secular political sphere and neither take up arms in defense of their country, nor vote in contribution to its leadership.¹⁶ Yet against this, Niebuhr would argue that pacifism is legitimate only insofar as it is limited by the scope of individual relations. As an actualization of the Christian law of love, pacifism is not an appropriate resolution of conflict on the political level of communities interacting with other communities.

While Niebuhr might share modern neo-conservatism's realistic appraisal of the limitations inherent in the human capacity to actualize just social and economic relations, he parts ways with the neo-conservative tendency to move from this realism regarding human nature to a cynicism which makes sin normative and rationalizes exploitative structures in the relations between human beings:

It is my strong conviction that a realist conception of human nature should be made the servant of an ethic of progressive justice and should not be made into a bastion of conservatism, particularly a conservatism

¹⁶See Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church is not Pacifist", in Essential, pp. 102-119.

which defends unjust privileges.¹⁷

I suspect, however, that Niebuhr would be equally critical of those who try to deduce the liberal-socialist-activist agenda from the mere fact that humans are spiritual and can self-transcend.

In the end Niebuhr offers perspectives which can be fully claimed by neither the right nor the left, though elements of each limited perspective can be found in the body of Niebuhr's thought. The political, intellectual, and spiritual character of the decades in which Niebuhr wrote were the last of an era which had supreme confidence in the rational, liberal, and moral resources available for the amelioration of the condition of humanity. Insofar as Niebuhr articulates a brilliant criticism of the naivete and sentimentality which saturated these times (and the issue of pacifism in particular), he gives expression to one of the chief characteristics of Red-Toryism: a heartfelt skepticism and tragic sensibility regarding modern strategies of hope, and cautious optimism regarding the real measure of freedom and strength given to us to better our predicament.

At the beginning of his career Niebuhr moved with passion and some minor personal reservation into supporting the American war effort. After World War I, he moved away from theoretical support for armed conflict, tentatively embracing pacifism as his own. But this also soon changed to a perspective which would

¹⁷Niebuhr, Man's Nature and his Communities, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), pp. 24-25.

never again leave Niebuhr comfortable in the ideological camps with which so many associates and commentators have sought to identify him. Through this study of his relation with the theory and action behind liberal pacifism, I have come to believe that Niebuhr finally sets his path down on a middle way, so that part of him is always at odds with the political parties and movements which, for a time, he may have served.

In one very interesting sense, then, it may be that Niebuhr was in fact an "isolationist", though not the kind against which he spoke so ardently in the 1920's and '30's. Part of Niebuhr's legacy today is the startling relevance of his thought. It comes to us, however, with curious set of variations of interpretation. But behind this legacy is the man whose deep commitment to realism and Christianity gave to his thought a dialectical and paradoxical slant. This quality, I believe, lends to Niebuhr's thinking a vitality and tension which distances him from the majority of 20th century thinkers. This tension, I think, may be fruitfully compared to certain parallels in Red-Toryism. A novel and distinctly Canadian approach could, I think, explore correlations in Niebuhr's thought and that of George Grant, Eugene Forsey, W.L. Morton, and other adherents of the so-called "Radical Tory" tradition in Canada.

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