

H. RICHARD NIEBUHR

THE CONCEPT OF DIVINE PERSONHOOD

IN

H. RICHARD NIEBUHR'S THOUGHT

by

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ABSTRACT

The major emphasis in this dissertation is on the development of H. Richard Niebuhr's concept of person as a key for understanding his approach to the theological problem of formulating the content of knowledge of God as it arises in the faith experience. This study begins with a brief introduction indicating the problematic character of the development of Niebuhr's concept of person, namely that while he clearly emphasized its centrality there is absent in his writings an explicit, formal statement that defines the conceptual content of what he intended by the term "person." The discussion that follows is an attempt to bring forward what seems to have been the content of Niebuhr's concept of person. This will involve the process of raising to prominence the "constants" that appear in his reflections on the relation between the divine and the human as relation between persons. The first chapter involves an investigation of the influence that the thought of Ernst Troeltsch, Karl Barth and others had on Niebuhr's own thinking. Therein is indicated the general framework of thought in which he had set for himself the task of providing for contemporary theology a

means of expressing the content of faith so as to avoid the excesses of revelational dogmatism, on the one hand, and rationalistic relativism, on the other. The development of his approach--a personalistic confessionism--appears in its general form in the second chapter, which involves a survey of his writings. The third chapter sets forth, as the cumulative effect of his writings, what appeared to be the essential components of Niebuhr's theological concept of person: act, freedom, faithfulness, and dialogue. The fourth chapter indicates how Niebuhr seemed to have envisioned the role of this concept as a crucial, corrective principle for modifying such outstanding approaches to the problem of knowledge of God as those of Troeltsch and Barth. This chapter also offers a suggestion as to what would be a consistent application of his thought to a development in theology since his death. The final chapter contains the present writer's response to certain critical reflections on Niebuhr's thought relevant to the central theme of the dissertation and a concluding section which suggests that the major emphasis and development of this discussion may be a modest but faithful and promising way to understand and appreciate more fully the essence of Niebuhr's complex and subtle thought.

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INTRODUCTION

In the preface to his book The Meaning of Revelation

H. Richard Niebuhr wrote

We are aware today that all our philosophical ideas, religious dogmas and moral imperatives are historically conditioned and this awareness tempts us to a new agnosticism. I have found myself unable to avoid the acceptance of historical relativism yet I do not believe the agnostic consequence is necessary.¹

The problem this awareness set for the theologian was, in Niebuhr's view, that of properly formulating for modern man the content which is involved in the knowledge of God given in revelation. He set for himself a task that involved a combination of the interests of Ernst Troeltsch and Karl Barth.² The book cited above and subsequent writings by Niebuhr clearly suggest that he sought to propose an alternative to the solutions offered by Troeltsch and Barth to the problem of how man, conscious of his radical historicity, can know God who is absolute in his sovereignty

¹H. Richard Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation (New York: Macmillan Co., 1941. Seventh printing, 1960), p. vii.

²Ibid., p. x. In terms of the basic convictions that guided Niebuhr's thoughts over the years, Ernst Troeltsch and Karl Barth represent the fundamental polarization of his thought, which, as Hans Frei has indicated, was a search for the means of uniting "a doctrine of radical monotheism and Christocentric revelation with an understanding of our life as responsible persons in an endlessly varied cultural history." Faith and Ethics, ed. Paul Ramsey (Harper Torchbook Edition: New York, 1965; Frei's article, "Niebuhr's Theological Background"), p. 64.

and freedom. In the course of reading his works one comes to see that a key to his proposal is the concept of personhood.

The most important fact about the whole approach to revelation to which we are committed by the acceptance of our existential situation, of the point of view of faith living in history, is that we must think and speak in terms of persons.¹

But what is it that we are thinking when we are thinking in terms of persons? That we must think in this manner, Niebuhr has suggested, is the most important fact about our whole approach to revelation. Understanding and evaluating this approach as an alternative would seem to demand a clear statement of what the content of those thoughts is when we are thinking in terms of persons.

But here lies the problem. Niebuhr gave no explicit, formal statement that defines what he considered to be the conceptual content of the term "person" when referring to knowledge of God. Given the fact that Niebuhr insisted we must think in terms of persons, and given the fact that he gives no formal statement as to what we are thinking when we think that way, the central question becomes: What, then, is the content of our concept of divine personhood according to Niebuhr's way of thinking?

This question will be the chief concern of the following discussion. In the course of this discussion it will be shown

¹Ibid., p. 143. Niebuhr's emphasis on the personalist dimension in Christian thought can be seen also in Christ and Culture (New York: Harper, Torchbook Edition, 1956), especially pp. 11-29 and 230-256; and in Radical Monotheism and Western Culture (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1970), and The Responsible Self (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

that while Niebuhr nowhere gave a formal definition of its content, the concept of divine personhood was set forth in another way. It will be shown also that the manner in which he presented this concept was determined by a particular understanding of the theologian's task. Niebuhr insisted that the theologian begins with a different question than that of the philosopher.

As a Protestant theologian or as a man who seeks to understand what he believes with the aid of Protestant theology, I do not raise the question of God in the way the philosopher of religion or the metaphysician does; while I cannot maintain that my way of asking is superior to theirs, neither can I be easily convinced that my question is illegitimate, that it is not a true, human, and important question.¹

The primary question for theology, as he saw it, was not "Does God exist?" or "What is the first cause, what the ultimate substance?" but rather "How is faith in God possible?" As the beginning of theological inquiry, therefore, this question involves reflection upon the subjective or personal aspect of religious experience. That this approach exposes the theologian to certain dangers--to solipsism, for instance--Niebuhr readily admitted, but he recognized that every form of inquiry runs certain risks

¹Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God," in Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, p. 115.

and the critical task is always an important part of our rational endeavors.¹ According to Niebuhr the theologian develops his own method "in view of the situation in which (he) works and of the object with which (he) deals."² That situation is one of participation in faith and that object is God as present to faith. The concept of personhood of God was set forth by Niebuhr in terms of the concrete, living experience of God in relation to man and man in relation to God, or, simply, God as he is known in faith.³ While he was concerned to discuss the personhood of God from a theological perspective Niebuhr did not regard that approach as necessarily antithetical to other ways of discussing it. He not only acknowledged the inherent difficulties and inadequacies involved in theological discussion of the subject but also indicated the need for collaboration with and complementation from other perspectives on it.⁴ Our study of this subject is primarily concerned with the internal coherence, meaning and function of the concept of divine personhood in Niebuhr's theology. We must, of course, recognize that there are relevant philosophical issues connected with such concepts as "person" and "God" but we will not attempt to deal with them here. The following discussion seems to have a significance and

¹Ibid., p. 116. See also Radical Monotheism, pp. 14-16.

²Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, p. 15.

³Ibid. See also The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), pp. 112f.

⁴Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, p. 14. Most of Niebuhr's major works indicate this attitude regarding subjects which become concerns of disciplines other than theology.

integrity of its own since further clarification of Niebuhr's thought in terms of its theological character may contribute positively toward discussion of its relationship and relevance to other ways of thinking. The following discussion will be an attempt to bring more sharply into view what the essential components of Niebuhr's thought on the personhood of God were and how they determined his efforts to combine the main interests of Troeltsch and Barth, providing what seemed to be an alternative for theology in its task of explaining how radically historical men come to know the absoluteness of God. This discussion will take place in the larger context of viewing influences of Niebuhr's thought, the general development of his theology toward a personalistic confessionalism, and specific commentaries on his thought regarding that development.

CHAPTER ONE

MAJOR INFLUENCES IN NIEBUHR'S THOUGHT

It has been said that an adequate starting point for a description of Niebuhr's thought is to view his position as lying between those of Ernst Troeltsch and Karl Barth.¹ It has also been said that a description based exclusively on that view could lead to a misunderstanding.² Niebuhr himself insisted that his personal and intellectual integrity never rested upon loyalties to the kind of liberalism, sometimes associated with Troeltsch, or of neo-orthodoxy, linked with Barth, that had been connected with certain periods in his own thought.³

Niebuhr read widely and deeply, as his works reflect. As one commentator put it, he attended to the extremes taken on various issues yet he saw them not as "alternatives between which we must choose" but rather as "limits between

¹See Libertus Hoedemaker, The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr, (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970), p. 12; also Hans Frei, op. cit., p. 64; and Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. x; "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," Christian Century, LXXVII, 9 (March 2, 1960), pp. 248-251.

²Sidney Ahlstrom, "H. Richard Niebuhr's Place in American Thought," Christianity and Crisis, XXIII, 20 (November 25, 1963), p. 215. (See below p. 64.)

³Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 248.

which we must move, and elements of truth that must inform one another."¹

Niebuhr's general background included, on the one hand, the Puritan tradition in which his personal religious convictions were rooted, and, on the other hand, the academic tradition of nineteenth century Protestant theology which profoundly influenced his intellectual development.² In the former tradition Niebuhr learned to regard the awareness of God in the miraculous act of self-revealing. The emphasis is on divine sovereignty and freedom and the unworthiness of man who, in his lostness, sinfulness, and idolatrousness, can only look upon this action of God as a great mystery of infinite graciousness to which he must respond in utter gratitude. In the latter tradition Niebuhr inherited the problems raised by Kant regarding the relation of knowledge of God to the rest of our knowledge. Is God known as an external reality in relation to man, grasped in the manner that the mind apprehends other objects in the natural order, or is reason in its speculative operations incapable of knowing God and therefore such knowledge is gained in another way?³ The basic issue was the unacceptability of

¹Daniel Day Williams, "H. Richard Niebuhr: A Personal Memoir," Christianity and Crisis, XXIII, 20, (November 25, 1963), p. 212. Williams does not deny that Niebuhr had no alternatives of his own to offer but rather emphasizes the latter's careful concern to avoid fixing too early on the formal doctrine or choosing an excessively narrow base.

²See Hans Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background," in Faith and Ethics, pp. 9-64.

³Ibid., p. 32f.

authoritarian dogmatism, recourse to the irrational, supernaturalistic explanations based on miracle, and the agnostic dualisms that kept knowledge of God and the rest of our knowledge in separate, irreconcilable mental realms. The attempts made by Kant, Schleiermacher, Hegel, Kierkegaard and Troeltsch to explain the nature of man's knowledge of God are some of the most important threads of thought woven into the nineteenth century, creating the intellectual context in which Niebuhr sought his own solution to the question: How do we know God?¹ It was this same development of thought that gave rise to Karl Barth's reaction in the first quarter of the twentieth century.² The long struggle to ground theological thought in a metaphysical system was met by his insistence that the knowledge of God of which the theologian speaks is grounded in the miraculous event of Jesus, that the focal point, the beginning and end of all theological reflection, is the objective reality of God as He is revealed in Christ. Knowledge of God does not depend on our previous knowledge of ourselves or the world but on God's absolute and sovereign freedom of action in revealing Himself. Neither

¹Frei observed that the practical, moral emphasis of the Puritan tradition and the speculative, theoretical interests of nineteenth century Protestant thought were actually not that far apart and it was the concern of crisis-theology in the 1920s to bring to bear on the moral life and the life of the mind the knowledge of God's transcendence and sovereignty. Frei, op. cit., p. 11.

²Barth's second edition of Der Römerbrief (1922) is often considered as the beginning of a new movement labelled "crisis-theology" because of its emphasis on the radical distance between man and the qualitatively wholly Other-ness of God (a Kierkegaardian theme). Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, transl. from sixth edition by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).

the external world of nature nor the inner rational operations of the human mind were to be considered, according to Barth, the sources of coming to understand the relation between God and man. Only by attending to the miracle of God's Word does the theologian pursue his course and learn to speak of God. Theology is to be conducted solely in terms of the concrete confrontation in which God first speaks to the theologian.

The radical break from the nineteenth century's preoccupation with man and his mind, particularly as that break was proposed by Karl Barth, became, for Niebuhr, an occasion of profound deliberation and decision. "The 30's," he wrote, "were for me as for many of my generation in the church the decisive period in the formation of basic personal convictions and in the establishment of theological formulations of those convictions."¹ In following the line of march that moved from Schleiermacher to Troeltsch he had learned, as had Barth, that Christian thought must seek its origins in the experience of faith, in the concrete and real relation that exists between God and man in revelation. But, like Barth, he came to realize that the tendency to turn from the object of that faith-relation to

¹Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 248. These convictions were listed by Niebuhr as 1) the sovereignty of God, 2) the lostness, sinfulness, and idolatrousness of man, 3) the miraculous character of faith, and 4) the radical historicity of human existence.

the subjective activity of faith; to turn theology into faith-ology or religion-ology, was a temptation to which the nineteenth century had repeatedly succumbed. This had led, in turn, to what Niebuhr considered "the most prevalent source of error in all thinking, and perhaps especially in theology and ethics"--self defensiveness.¹ In other words, a theology which attends primarily to the subject, man, rather than to the object, God, tends to become defensive about the form in which faith is expressed by man instead of "resolutely confessing" the content of that faith.²

The awareness of the radically historical character of human existence was central to Niebuhr's thought. Man's consciousness of his existing in time and time existing in him, of the radical relativity of his situation, the limitations that spatio-temporal realities put on his grasp of the meaning of life, had become a major concern among many thinkers from the mid-nineteenth century on.³

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p.ix. He also pointed out that theologians must begin where Schleiermacher and Ritschl began, namely, with existing faith in God, but without reverting to a defense of faith itself, religion, or the natural spiritual life of man, as the ultimate purpose of theology. Ibid., pp. 22-38.

²That God is known only insofar as he relates to us is essential for Niebuhr's "confessionalist approach" which will be discussed later in this study. See below pp. 96f, 216f.

³The profound implications of such thought centering on man and his consciousness of time may be seen in terms of Nietzsche's relentless pursuit of the consequences which a thoroughgoing historical relativism brings. For a brief but lucid presentation of this, see George Grant, Time As History, Massey Lectures, Ninth Series, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

It had become increasingly clear, according to Niebuhr, that "if reason is to operate at all it must be content to work as historical reason."¹ While this recognition of reason's historical limitations must also apply to theology it does not imply subjectivism and scepticism.

It is not evident that the man who is forced to confess that his view of things is conditioned by the standpoint he occupies must doubt the reality of what he sees. It is not apparent that one who knows that his concepts are not universal must also doubt that they are concepts of the universal, or that one who understands how all his experience is historically mediated must believe that nothing is mediated through history.²

In other words, the recognition of our relativity did not mean, for Niebuhr, that we are without an absolute, that the absoluteness of God is not truly mediated to us in history. Rather it meant that the Christian claim to knowledge of the Absolute must include the acceptance of the relativity of the believer's situation and knowledge.³ Thus, one of the basic problems for the theologian today, as Niebuhr saw it, was that of formulating the content of knowledge of God given in revelation, "meaning by that word simply historic faith,"⁴ so as to reflect both the conviction that the

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 16.

²Ibid., pp. 18-19.

³Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, pp. 238-239.

⁴Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 22.

objective reality known is God in his absoluteness and sovereignty and the recognition of the radical historicity of human existence.

In summary, then, Niebuhr's double background, i.e., the Puritan tradition of divine sovereignty, human sinfulness, miraculous grace, and the nineteenth century academic tradition, especially as it became increasingly conscious of human historicity and relativity, is the essential framework in which his thought developed. In terms of outstanding figures in twentieth century religious thought, Karl Barth's emphasis on the absolute independence and sovereignty of God's self-revealing action and Troeltsch's emphasis on the radically relative perception of that action are the major positions between which Niebuhr found his own thought dramatically polarized.

As indicated earlier, there were many sources to which Niebuhr turned for illumination and guidance in the course of his reflections. The interactions between insights gained from them and from Troeltsch and Barth, combined with the activity of his own creative mind, led Niebuhr to develop a distinctive alternative as an answer to the question: How is knowledge of God possible for radically historical man? The first step in tracing this development is a discussion of the major influences on Niebuhr's thought. It will include a summary of the influence of Troeltsch and Barth respectively, as they represented for Niebuhr the most impressive positions being put forward in his day.

It will also include a summary of other thinkers whose insights were most important in the process of formulating his own answer to the question above.

A. Ernst Troeltsch

In a reflection on Niebuhr's contribution to American thought Sidney Ahlstrom, a former colleague of his at Yale University, wrote:

Niebuhr's academic career began, in effect, at Yale in 1924 with a submission of his doctoral dissertation, an impressive exposition of "The Religious Philosophy of Ernst Troeltsch," the great German church historian, sociologist, and theologian. Though never published, the thesis is in one sense the most important thing he ever wrote, for it focused interests that must have been forming for a decade and set the general direction of his career as a theologian. His best-known works all bear at least some marks of this influence.¹

Not only does Niebuhr appear to have found in Troeltsch's thought crucial insights into the problem that Christianity faced in modern times with the increasing awareness of human historicity and the relativity this implied for its claim to knowledge of the absoluteness of God, but he also seems to have developed profound respect for, and emulated, to some extent at least, the style of his thought. In the introduction to his dissertation, Niebuhr wrote:

Troeltsch limited neither his interests nor his activities to the sphere of his profession but was deeply concerned to find a solution for the problems of contemporary religion and social life by means of the practical measures Church and state could take as well as by philosophical and theological labor of thought.²

¹Ahlstrom, op. cit., p. 213-214.

²Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion" (Yale University doctoral dissertation, 1924, University of Michigan Microfilms, Ann Arbor), p. 2.

These and other comments on Troeltsch's broadness of sympathies, respect and tenderness, resistance to systematization, and openness to dialogue and criticism by which he could learn from others, are strikingly similar to the assessment of Niebuhr's own intellectual and personal traits offered by his students and colleagues.¹ A further dimension to the pervasive influence of Troeltsch can be seen by briefly reviewing the content of Niebuhr's doctoral dissertation. In so doing, we can see not only how thoroughly he grasped the essential problem Troeltsch was trying to solve but also several of the specific insights which Troeltsch gained in the process of developing his philosophy of religion and which remained significant for Niebuhr as he developed his own thought.

In his dissertation on Troeltsch's philosophy of religion Niebuhr considered the chapters on Troeltsch's theory of religious knowledge and on the philosophy of history the central chapters of his thesis.² Combined with the chapters on Troeltsch's psychology of religion and on his metaphysics, these constituted what Niebuhr understood as the fourfold structure of Troeltsch's method in the philosophy of religion.³ The centrality of the epistemological

¹Liston Pope, "H. Richard Niebuhr: A Personal Appreciation," in Faith and Ethics, pp. 3-8; also D. D. Williams, S. Ahlstrom, J. Allen, in Christianity and Crisis, XXIII, 20, (November 25, 1963), pp. 209-219.

²Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," p. iii.

³Ibid., pp. 92f; especially pp. 102, 108, 109.

and historical consideration in the development of his thought on Troeltsch stemmed from Niebuhr's conviction that the problem of religion presented itself to Troeltsch in a twofold manner.¹ On the one hand, there was the problem of dealing with the subjectivism of pure empiricism which would reduce religion to an illusion.² On the other hand, there was the problem of dogmatism which would isolate a particular religion from the rest of history as a miraculously born religion, making an assessment of its relation to other elements in human civilization impossible to determine on rational grounds.³ Thus, Niebuhr saw Troeltsch as having assigned himself the double task of 1) amending the theory of religious knowledge, particularly as it was expressed in Ritschlianism to overcome the skepticism toward which the empirical approach to religion tended, and 2) providing a philosophy of history

which will know how to choose the true, the permanent and the good out of history and so achieve a standard by means of which it will

¹Ibid., p. 92.

²Ibid., pp. 104f.

³Niebuhr viewed Troeltsch's thought as a constant effort to overcome the supernaturalistic dogmatism of Ritschl and his followers. Cf. Ibid., p. 43f. Troeltsch was not opposed to all reference to the supernatural but rather only to that type which "claims a miraculous origin for one religion while denying it to all others." Cf. Ibid., p. 47; also pp. 223f.

be possible to measure historical realities, such as Christianity and the other religions, and determine their value for us.¹

Both tasks were launched by Troeltsch through implementation of the Kantian notion of the a priori.² In seeking to discover the essence of religious history which would enable us to determine the value of Christianity and other religions Troeltsch found his answer in the historical a priori, which is the presence of a system of potential values in the observer by means of which he is able to evaluate historical entities as they impress themselves upon the observer.³ In seeking to establish the validity of religious knowledge which would preserve its non-scientific, atheoretic character and yet maintain the rightfulness of its claim to be knowledge Troeltsch found his answer in the religious a priori which is "the absolute relation issuing from the essence of reason to an absolute substance, by virtue of which all realities and especially all values are related to

¹Ibid., p. 97. This philosophy would be the result of an approach that takes the historical method seriously and seeks to overcome history by means of history. Cf. Ibid., p. 48: Such a philosophy would meet the challenge of modern thought characterized by a) the genetic mode of historical explanation which views Christianity as part of general religious history, partially dependent upon the faiths of the Graeco-Roman world, and b) the sociological mode of thought which demonstrates the dependence of Christianity in any form upon general cultural, social and economic conditions. Ibid., pp. 95-96.

²Ibid., pp. 98-110. "Apriority means simply that certain principles or values cannot be explained as derived from pre-suppositions or antecedents. . . They convince by means of their immanent meaning and are not dependent for that meaning upon anything outside of themselves." Ibid., pp. 169-170.

³Ibid., pp. 111-112, 243, 246.

an absolute substance as their source and standard."¹

Thus, Niebuhr's attempt to set forth Troeltsch's philosophy of religion led him to discover two distinct methods having been developed by Troeltsch. The first method, which Niebuhr suggested was primary and to which Troeltsch seemed inclined toward the end of his career as well, emphasized the historical, or ethical, a priori. The procedure involved the introductory stage of an objectively descriptive history, using psychology and sociology as auxiliary sciences, followed by a philosophy of history with its central doctrine, i.e., the a priori principle that all our values are relative to our historical situation, yet absolutely binding within that situation, and the subsequent epistemological and metaphysical stages in which the source of the a prioris and their relation to reality are explained. Throughout this method the central concern is to develop a philosophy of religion which will enable us to assess the value of religion as a social and historical reality, to answer this question: Is Christianity the absolutely valid religion which must be synthesized with our whole culture, and if it is, how is this synthesis to be brought about?² The second method focused primarily on the problem of the validity of religious knowledge and, Niebuhr observed, where Troeltsch discussed explicitly the possibility of a philosophy of

¹Ibid., p. 181; See also p. 112.

²ibid., p. 94.

religion he described the procedure as beginning with an empirical study of religion, or the psychology of religion, which discovers the phenomenal essence of religion, followed by epistemology, which discovers the a priori essence of religion, and then the philosophy of the history of religion and the metaphysics of religion.¹ In this method the religious a priori, which Troeltsch is seen to have defined variously, but most characteristically as reference to an Absolute Source and Goal, is the crucial key.² Because the religious a priori is discovered as always filled with empirical content and appears in history as subject to development and change the philosophy of religious history is the study of the empirical actualization and historical development of the a priori element. The metaphysics of religion seeks to discover the relation of religious knowledge (the idea of God) to the rest of our knowledge, of individual consciousness to consciousness in general.³

The centrality of the chapters on Troeltsch's theory of religious knowledge and his philosophy of history is apparent, therefore, in view of the fact that these chapters contain Niebuhr's interpretation of the two key ideas, i.e., the historical, or ethical, a priori and the religious a priori, which led Troeltsch to develop two methods in his

¹Ibid., pp. 103f.

²Ibid., pp. 181f.

³Ibid., pp. 265f.

philosophy of religion. In the chapter which introduces the second half of his dissertation Niebuhr pointed out that the presence of these two methods in Troeltsch's thought was due to the different conceptions of religion which the latter had.¹ The first regarded religion primarily as a social and historical reality, the second viewed religion as primarily the immediate, personal, and inner experience of the presence of an Absolute, or of God.

Here Niebuhr detected the basic source of difficulty with which Troeltsch's philosophy of religion was beset and which caused so much of the "uncertainty" evident in his work.² On the one hand, he attempted to base his philosophy of religion on the a priori of history, which was an ethical a priori by means of which the various historical religions and their relative value could be judged. The result was that the standard of judgment, though a priori, was relative

¹The first half of the dissertation is a discussion of Troeltsch's development in stages: early influences (up to 1891), the anti-Ritschlian reaction (1891-1903), and neo-Kantian and historical periods (1903-1913; 1913-1923). It was Niebuhr's conclusion that the doctrine of the religious a priori, although important at mid-point in Troeltsch's career, was not to be regarded as the key to his thought. Rather, the historical interest was primary, and the constant element in Troeltsch's work was the idea of the metaphysics of the spirit and its historical evolution. In other words, the key, from Niebuhr's point of view, was Troeltsch's doctrine of the participation of the finite spirits in the Infinite, "the final thought...in which all the many interests and directions of his thought converge." (*Ibid.*, 266; see also below p. 22.)

²*Ibid.*, p. 112.

and therefore Christianity's superiority was relative to western civilization, though absolute. The ethical a priori, in other words, imposed an absolute obligation upon the knower but the obligation was relative to the knower's situation in history. On the other hand, Niebuhr pointed out, Troeltsch also attempted to base his philosophy upon a religious a priori, discoverable in mystic experience, which refers all things and all values to an Absolute as their goal and source. This approach included the notion that the a priori is actualized and developed in the concrete and relative situation.¹

According to Niebuhr, Troeltsch's ambivalence about the approach which would best serve in constructing a philosophy of religion for Christianity stemmed from the basic structure of his problem, one which Niebuhr himself is seen to have adopted, and this, as Hoedemaker aptly stated, amounted to "the persistent tendency to approach religion culturally with an emphasis on relativity, and to approach culture religiously with a quest for the absolute."²

Niebuhr concluded his discussion of Troeltsch's methodological problems with the following comment.

Troeltsch's philosophy of religion must be regarded then as something less than a unified structure. Two approaches and two main ideas

¹Ibid., pp. 112-116. The religious a priori is grounded in Troeltsch's metaphysical doctrine of participation, i.e., the participation of the finite spirits in the Infinite Spirit.

²Hoedemaker, op. cit., p. 17.

are combined without being brought into complete accord. They do not conflict as much as they resist inclusion into a single scheme. . . . The inclusiveness of the attempt merits admiration which it may be necessary to withhold from the results.¹

Niebuhr's assessment of Troeltsch's attempt to have the best of both worlds, so to speak, was to point out that the latter was convinced of the historical and social conditions to which all moral and mental life is subject and that the final source of all apriority whether in the realm of ethics or natural sciences was the union of the finite with the Infinite, the individual with God.² In all stages of the development of his philosophy of religion, the governing principle was, according to Niebuhr, Troeltsch's metaphysical doctrine of "participation," i.e., that there exists a secret alliance between human reason and reality and this secret alliance is the identity of human monads with the Divine All-Life.³ Thus, every section of history is in immediate relation to the Absolute.⁴ All finite spirits participate in the Infinite.⁵ Even in the first "empirical" state of inquiry Niebuhr detected the influence of this doctrine in that Troeltsch insisted that wherever the phenomenon of religion appears there is the expressed belief in the presence of God,

¹Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," p. 116.

²Ibid., p. 115.

³Ibid., p. 217.

⁴Ibid., p. 257.

⁵Ibid., p. 266.

that religious experience is based ultimately on " a hidden alliance between man and the ultimate reality."¹ Earlier in his dissertation, in the historical survey of Troeltsch's works, Niebuhr pointed out that although Troeltsch persistently sought to find the system of culture and religion in the material of history and through an empirical method, and although the historical interest was primary, it remained the case that "the fundamental and constant element in his thought was the idea of a metaphysics of the spirit in its historical evolution."² In Troeltsch's philosophy of history the truth or value of religion hinged on three basic elements, according to Niebuhr. They were: 1) the relativity of all historical values, including religion; 2) the a priori and imperative obligation of such values; and 3) the existence of a presentiment, an intuition, a direct inner experience of Divine Life. Niebuhr observed that while Troeltsch was often seen as a relativist and was most frequently criticized in terms of the first of those three elements in his thought it was his (Niebuhr's) view that the emphasis upon the a priori character of religion and the trend toward a metaphysical interpretation of apriorism warrant the suggestion that the second and third elements were more important to Troeltsch. He stated, then,

¹ Ibid., pp. 144-145, 150. Thus, Niebuhr's description of Troeltsch's philosophy as a "modified monadology." Ibid., p. iii.

² Ibid., pp. 85-86.

that Troeltsch's philosophy of religious history could be regarded as a philosophy of "complete obligation" rather than a "philosophy of relativism."¹

Finally, Niebuhr saw the metaphysical doctrine of Troeltsch--the participation of the finite spirits in the Infinite--as "the final thought . . . in which all the many interests and directions of his thought converge."² This doctrine, based to a large extent upon the philosophy of Leibniz, Niebuhr regarded as the basis for Troeltsch's "modified monadology" and although in that approach finite beings participate in the Infinite they remain always finite, so their thoughts can extend from the inner intuition of this only to approximations. According to Niebuhr, Troeltsch wished to retain the element of mysticism in religion without allowing for fanaticism. Niebuhr's discussion of the metaphysics was very brief, as Troeltsch's own writings presented it in a rather sketchy manner. To what extent Troeltsch believed his metaphysical notion of participation resolved the antinomies of his philosophy is unclear but Niebuhr suggested, at the end, that the dualisms of rationalism and irrationalism, the relative and the absolute, pluralism and monism seem to have been carried "only a step farther back."³

¹Ibid., p. 263.

²Ibid., p. 266.

³Ibid., p. 270.

In Niebuhr's view, Troeltsch's philosophy was a philosophy of compromise,

of the compromise between the religion of the individual and the faith of the church, the compromise between rationalism and irrationalism, between the categorical imperative and the demands of the natural man, between the service of humanity and the service of the State. Hence, in religion, it is both a philosophy of absoluteness and of relativity, of faith and of doubt.¹

The above passage appeared as an appendage to Niebuhr's dissertation. Judging from his later reflections on the ethical failure of Christianity (in The Social Sources of Denominationalism), which he attributed directly to its compromising attitude with the social and economic demands of secular life, and on the radical transformation of values brought about by God's self-revelation (in The Meaning of Revelation), from his statements (in Christ and Culture) that "an absolute standard cannot be compromised--it can only be "broken" and "we cannot excuse ourselves by saying that we have made the best compromise possible,"--and, finally, from the development of the theme of radical monotheism and the ethics of responsibility based on that theme, Niebuhr, at the very start of his academic career, expressed in that one phrase labelling Troeltsch's philosophy of religion the crucial, compelling question to which he devoted the major part of his life's work--What is the Christian theologian's answer to the philosophy of compromise?

¹Ibid., p. 270.

Niebuhr's indebtedness to Troeltsch did not consist, however, in merely raising the above question. While he may have withheld admiration for the results of Troeltsch's attempt to combine the historical and the mystical elements in religion there are clear indications of a number of specific insights, over and above the principle of historical relativity and the structuring of the problem it poses, that can be singled out and regarded as significant contributions to Niebuhr's eventual formulation of an alternative to Troeltsch. The following is a brief presentation of what those insights were.

1. Troeltsch's Psychology.

In the discussion of the method of psychology of religion Niebuhr noted the suggestion by Troeltsch that in man's ethical, religious and aesthetic consciousness there can be seen to exist a further capacity, an Anlage, by which he experiences his existence both in time and as a causal agent in a distinctively different manner than posited by the natural sciences. Besides mechanistic, serial time and cause and effect equivalency there is rational causality and intelligible time. Troeltsch modified the Kantian doctrine of the phenomenality of time and of causal equivalence by adding psychical time and causality. As to the former, Troeltsch saw the need to concede that the rational acts of consciousness enter into time possessing "intelligible temporality" and, as to the latter, there needed to be recognized psychical cause which involves succession without

equivalence, a break in the causally determined series, interference on the part of autonomous reason.¹ Recognition of this aspect of the psychical life of man is necessary, Troeltsch stated, because

I question the applicability of the causal view, in the sense of general uniform necessities, to the historical object and to the living totality of psychical processes, not only because a purely mechanical and causal view and an appreciating evaluation cannot be simply placed alongside of each other as parallel views which do not touch each other, but also because I have not been able to convince myself in any case of the actual successful application of the causal view to the connection between feelings and desires upon the one hand and ideas and generally valid values upon the other hand. I believe also that the whole higher psychical life with its reference to an un-sensual reality demands ontological explanation by means of independent principles.²

In other words, an empirical approach to psychology based exclusively on the mechanistic interpretation of time and causality failed, in Troeltsch's mind, to do justice to the spiritual life of man as a free, autonomous being.

Niebuhr's development of the concepts of time and history in The Meaning of Revelation and in The Responsible Self are

¹Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," pp. 122-126.

²Ibid., p. 123. Niebuhr's translation of this statement by Troeltsch is slightly different from the English edition of Troeltsch's Die Asolutheit des Christentums (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1902, 2nd edition, 1912), p. xv. Translator David Reid's version is as follows: ... a purely causal, mechanistic view and an evaluational one simply cannot be left as parallels that never meet, ... I have never been able to convince myself that the causal approach, starting from perceptions and desires and ending up with ideas and universal values, can really prove feasible. Further, I think that the entire life of the human spirit, in its relation to an intangible reality, requires an ontological foundation in principles independent of those appropriate to the causal mechanistic approach. Troeltsch, The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions, trans. by David Reid (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1971), p. 31.

suggestive of Troeltsch's influence. The "time that is in man" and the "timefulness of man" treated respectively in these two works are notions that bear in their intentions at least a striking resemblance to the idea put forward in Troeltsch's psychology. Niebuhr had noted in his dissertation that Troeltsch's thoughts followed Bergson to some extent, especially regarding the interaction in which body and sense-organs appear as the focusing point of mind-energy and as its apparatus. He mentioned Bergson as an influence in his writing of The Kingdom of God in America¹ in which the dynamic spiritual aspect of the past-, present-, and future-orientated interpretations of God's Kingdom was the main theme. Niebuhr tried to show the inner, spiritual cause that moved Christianity and was responsible for the distinctive characteristics it acquired in the course of its history in America.

Another element of Troeltsch's thought on psychology seems to have had a lasting effect on Niebuhr, namely, the methodological principle which Troeltsch expressed as "Nachfühlen und Beschreiben," or "the sympathetic apprehension and description of psychic states with the aid of one's own real or at least hypothetical religious feelings."² Troeltsch's

¹Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America (New York: Harper and Row, Harper Torchbook, 1959. Originally published in 1937.)

²Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," p. 131.

argument for this notion was based on the fact that in dealing with the religious experience of man one is concerned with the spiritual personal life of the individual or community and, in order to grasp the essence of that, one must possess in reality, or acquire through hypothesis and sympathy, the religious states under consideration. The counterpart to this in Niebuhr's thought is his insistence that only from the standpoint of participation in faith can one do theology.¹ Niebuhr was convinced that the only God the Christian theologian could talk about was the God known in actual relation.² The ability of the psychologist to appreciate religious quality as a requirement of the psychological method in Troeltsch's thought became in Niebuhr's theological method the indispensable qualification, for the theologian, of participation in the activity of faith. While Troeltsch considered the metaphysical doctrine of participation as the basic ground for the possibility of having this ability and, ultimately, for coming to know other persons, Niebuhr understood the basis for being able to do theology as the concrete confrontation of God, and the knowledge of other persons is radically transformed by that

¹Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism and Western Culture (New York: Harper and Row 1970), p. 15. Originally published, 1960.

²Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry (New York: Harper 1956), p. 112. Toward the end of his life Niebuhr regretted his own use of the term historical relativism and suggested that "historical relationalism" was perhaps a better term to express the subjective, participatory dimension of faith-reasoning because it involves the subject without necessarily implying subjectivism. See Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 249.

confrontation. As with this element in Troeltsch's thought so in all the others which carried over into Niebuhr's reflections, the theocentric principle is the fundamental corrective.

2. Troeltsch's Epistemology and Metaphysics.

In his discussions of Troeltsch's epistemology and metaphysics Niebuhr pointed out that the former's religious a priori, defined as the intuition of the union between the finite spirits and the Infinite, was his solution to the problem of the knowledge of other persons--a problem which, according to Niebuhr, was of central significance to Troeltsch's whole theory of knowledge.

The knowledge of other persons is possible because of the common participation of the finite monads in the Infinite Spirit and because of their common identity with that spirit and so with each other.¹

Niebuhr, however, saw the divine self-revelation not as a development, or mere confirmation, of a metaphysical notion of participation in divine personhood, but rather as a radical and permanently revolutionary transformation of any prior notions we might have had in that respect.²

¹Niebuhr, "Ernest Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," p. 218.

²Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, Chapter 4, especially pp. 175ff. Hans Frei alludes to the fact that since Niebuhr never developed a theory of analogy regarding the knowledge of God as person and human self-knowledge it appears that he was convinced that personhood was unequivocally the "common ground" that both God and men shared. This characteristic of Niebuhr's thought may be yet another carry-over from Troeltsch. Niebuhr avoided metaphysical considerations but regardless of the interpretation one might put on the apparent suggestion that personhood is the common ground Niebuhr would insist on the transformative effect of God's self-revealing on any understanding we might have had prior to revelation. (See below, pp. 149f).

3. Troeltsch's Philosophy of History.

In the section on the philosophy of history the elements of individuality and development in Troeltsch's conception of history are of particular significance in terms of Niebuhr's thought. In Christ and Culture he referred to the fact that his intentions were "to supplement and in part correct" Troeltsch's work by viewing the "relative history of finite men and movements (as) under the governance of the absolute God."¹ From a theological, or theo-centric, standpoint the individual in history, unique and unrepeatable, peculiar to its own time and place, and the development of history, the dynamic ever-changing process of individuals in their interrelatedness, were aspects of the human condition confronted by a personal deity calling those individuals in their relatedness to respond in faith, which Niebuhr described as "reliance of a person on a person."² Individuality and the developmental characteristics of history are not to be viewed from the Christian perspective as merely the particular fate in which Christianity is one of the inevitabilities to which some are obligated to respond in "consistent compromise, as little unsatisfactory as we can manage," but rather as a particular fate which demands, like it or not, a response of uncompromising loyalty to the One whose loyalty

¹Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, p. xii.

²Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God," Supplementary Essay in Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, p. 125. Originally published as "The Nature and Existence of God" in Motive IV (1943), pp. 13-15, 43-46.

towards us is unlimited. The individual developing in history was viewed by Troeltsch primarily as an element in the large metaphysical scheme that seemed to have been in the back of his mind throughout his writings. Niebuhr's correction of Troeltsch's historical relativism involved the transformation of individuality and development into personal becoming before the Absolute Person of God. Thus, when he wrote that he believed it to be "an aberration of faith as well as reason to absolutize the finite but all of this relative history of finite men and movements is under the governance of God,"¹ Niebuhr was expressing his understanding that the corrective principle of Judaeo-Christian radical monotheism was that the God who rules over relativity has revealed himself as a person.² While Niebuhr's acceptance of the relativist position was complete, insofar as both the objects of history and the observer himself are recognized as spatio-temporally conditioned, it was, for him, the personalist dimension of revelation that ultimately renders that condition meaningful and upon which an uncompromising faith rests.³

¹Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, p. xii.

²Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, pp. 59f; and The Meaning of Revelation, Chapter 4.

³Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, pp. 239-241.

Niebuhr's work on Troeltsch was undoubtedly a crucial factor in the subsequent development of his own thought. In a very real sense the Troeltschean problem, i.e., of reconciling the acceptance of relativity and the claim to knowledge of the absolute, became Niebuhr's own problem, and the latter's attempts to solve it involved both positive and negative reactions to some of the insights gained by Troeltsch. As Niebuhr's personalist approach seemed to reflect the essential character of his response to Troeltsch's philosophy of compromise it is no less true that this approach was also his response to the Christocentric dogmatism of Karl Barth, whose thought will be the subject matter of the following section.

B. Karl Barth.

It was only three years before Niebuhr completed his dissertation on Troeltsch that Karl Barth published his second edition of the Römerbrief.¹ The beginning of what became a long debate with Schleiermacher's thought and Schleiermacher's disciples, Barth's Römerbrief was written with the intention of liberating theology from the historicism and psychologism he saw emanating from die religionsgeschichtliche Schule and its preoccupation with the historicity of Jesus as a relative manifestation of the Absolute. While Barth agreed with the position that viewed history as the sphere of the relative he rejected the notion that it possessed any inherent meaning or value worthy of theological concern. Barth considered religion, like history, to be in the realm of the relative and while both reveal certain aspects of the human condition and its possibilities it was his purpose to draw the Christian theologian's attention to the absolutely free initiative of God as the sole source of real meaning and value for man.² The emphasis for Barth was on the miracle of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the miracle of God's entrance into human history without becoming part of history. The point of entrance,

¹Karl Barth, Epistle to the Romans, trans. by Edwyn Hoskyns, (London: Oxford University Press, 6th Ed., 1957).

²Ibid., "The Preface to the Second Edition," pp. 2-15; and pp. 115ff, 148. See also Thomas W. Ogletree, Christian Faith and History (New York: Abingdon, 1965), pp. 81-96.

according to Barth, is a boundary between two dimensions of reality, time and eternity.¹ This particular point is "once for all" and is the light of eternity shining on the temporal world, revealing the latter for what it is, giving it its ultimate meaning and value from above. But the main issue is the separation between Christianity and history which this revelation implies. To overcome the inherent problems this creates for man, not the least of which are the questions of how he knows God at all in this separated condition and how this condition can be made meaningful, Barth saw it necessary to use dialectical language and spoke of God revealing himself as the unknown, and of man attaining his meaning by acknowledging his meaninglessness.² The Epistle to the Romans shows that the major thrust of Barth's argument is to re-establish the absoluteness, freedom and sovereignty of God for theology and to emphasize the fact that its subject, God, is the fundamental point of departure for reflection, in contrast to philosophy and religion which have nature or the human subject as their beginning.

The Troeltschean alternative to rationalism and exclusivistic supernaturalism, namely a "re-activated broad and deep realism"³ which would provide theology with the

¹Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 29.

²Ibid., p. 45, 145. (The influence of Kierkegaard is evident throughout this work, and explicitly acknowledged. See pp. 99, 116-117, 439ff.)

³Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," p. 214.

means for addressing itself to modern man's increasing historical awareness, was challenged by Barth.¹ Troeltsch's réalism was apparently not realistic enough to suit Barth. Perhaps also Troeltsch's relativism was not relativistic enough for Barth, in the sense that the latter seemed to suggest that the lessons of history should have taught the former to seek its meaning elsewhere. Insisting that he was neither anti-philosophical nor blind to history's lessons, Barth offered his alternative, a theological realism which understood the Word of God given to faith as the only proper object of theology and by which its content and method are to be determined.

The impact of Barth's thought was felt strongly in Europe and, shortly thereafter, in North America. The movement it started, variously called "dialectical theology," "crisis-theology," "neo-orthodoxy" and "Barthianism," was an important element in what Niebuhr referred to as a "decisive period in the formation of basic personal convictions and in the establishment of theological formulation of those convictions."² Its most positive influence on Niebuhr was the reinforcement of his conviction of God's absolute sovereignty as the fundamental principle for Christian

¹Cf. Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 204.

²Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," Christian Century, LXXVII, 20 (March 2, 1960), pp. 248, 250.

theology. Niebuhr was hesitant, however, to pursue what he saw as the increasingly epistemological interests of Barth. According to Niebuhr, Barth and his followers seemed to turn to "orthodoxy as right teaching, right doctrine, and to faith as fides, as assent," and Niebuhr was led farther away from that movement as his own thought focused more and more on the primacy of personal relations in understanding faith.¹

The Christocentric theme in Barth's thought was a definite barrier for Niebuhr. He considered the exclusivity implied by Barth's emphasis on the Christ-event as the sole source of our knowledge of God to be a weakening of the principle of God's sovereignty and, as well, making it almost impossible for Christianity to address itself to all men, enclosed as they were in their own particular experiences and cultural loyalties. On more than one occasion Niebuhr indicated that he thought crisis-theology lacked means of

¹Ibid., p. 250. For a summary of the development of Barth's thought see Thomas F. Torrance, "Karl Barth," in Ten Makers of Modern Protestant Thought, edited by George H. Hunt (New York: Association Press, 1958), pp. 58-68. Therein, Torrance points to three stages in Barth's thought. The first, a liberal critical stage; the second, a dialectical stage; and the third, a biblical dogmatic stage. With respect to this development Niebuhr appeared to agree with Barth's initial effort to overcome the man-centered tendencies of liberalism, but with the growing Christological emphasis and the accompanying epistemological concerns of the second and third stages Niebuhr became more critical of Barth.

expressing to man his social and ethical task in the world.¹ While Niebuhr wished to maintain the sovereignty of God and the centrality of Jesus in Christian faith, he did not agree with the exaggerations of the other-worldly and Christological tendencies he detected in Barthian thought.² In reaction to the post-liberal tendencies to equate theology with Christology, Niebuhr wrote:

In my confession of faith, as in that of many men I know, the experience of trust in God and the vow of loyalty to Him comes before the acknowledgement of Christ's Lordship.³

It may be the case that Niebuhr misunderstood Barth to have meant that we could speak of crisis in the human-divine relation only in terms of Christ and then, because of Christ the crisis is dissolved. Barth's intentions can, however, be interpreted otherwise, that is, to have pointed to the fact that the particularity of the Christ-event as a radical confirmation, once for all, revealed precisely that God is sovereign and in Jesus we see how little right we have to speak of God at all.⁴ Whether Niebuhr saw this dimension

¹See Niebuhr, The Social Sources of Denominationalism, p. 275; and Niebuhr's "Translator's Preface," for Paul Tillich's The Religious Situation (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., Meridian Books, 1969), p. 22.

²See Frei's comments in Faith and Ethics, pp. 101, 105.

³Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 250.

⁴Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics II, 1, (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1957), pp. 53-56, 128ff.

to Barth's thought or not is hard to tell, but the fact remains that he felt the latter's emphasis on the particularity of the Christ-event to be over-emphasis.

While the Christocentric and epistemological concerns of Barth were issues that separated Niebuhr from him, certain elements in Barth's systematic theology (as expressed in the Church Dogmatics) concerning the nature of God and man show their thoughts to be quite similar. The following will be a brief summary of Barth's understanding of the personhood of God and man since it is on this matter that the influence of Barth on Niebuhr is most relevant to the central concerns of this dissertation.

1. Barth on the Concept of God as Person.

It was Barth's constant theme that God is known in the revelation of Jesus Christ, and that this knowledge depends absolutely on God's initiative. Whatever readiness there is in man is there only through the power of God acting in Jesus.¹ As Barth discussed the "Reality of God" which becomes known to man through God's revealing power, the fundamental emphasis is on the being of God as person.² The first element in the conceptualization of God is that of his being in act. We know that God is act because that by which

¹Ibid., pp. 128-178.

²This theme in Church Dogmatics is a consistent development from the conviction he expressed in The Epistle to the Romans. "God is Personality: He is One, Unique, and Particular--and therefore He is Eternal and Omnipotent." (p. 276)

we know God at all is through his action upon us.¹ But in that action God is known to be more than pure act--he is a particular act and this is emphatically revealed in Jesus Christ.² The uniqueness of God's being-in-act establishes the absoluteness of his freedom in acting.³ As self-originating activity, God owes his being-in-act to none other than himself. This much, Barth insisted, conveys the essence of God as person. But which person? This is settled, again in revelation, by the singularity of the act which essentially is the action of love.⁴ The self-designation of God as "I am" turns us to the act that he is and in that action we discover that God is He Who, without having to do so, seeks and creates fellowship between Himself and us.

God, then, is a being in act, free, loving. The expression of God as love (I John 4), however, does not allow us to say that love is God, but rather intends to convey to us the particular loving act God is, which, as Barth went on to say, "has only to be his love to be everything for us."⁵ This notion was implied earlier by Barth in Romans when he

¹Barth, Church Dogmatics II, 1, p. 261ff.

²Ibid., p. 264.

³Ibid., p. 265, and 297ff.

⁴Ibid., p. 272ff.

⁵Ibid., p. 276.

translated pistis in Paul's epistle (3,3) as "faithfulness" because the context called for that special nuance. ("For what if some were without faith? Shall their want of faith make of none effect the faithfulness of God?")¹ There he argued that no single text but rather the whole thrust of revelation as set forth in the Bible's entirety conveys to Christian theology the notion of God's loving act in terms of his steadfast fidelity, in being, as he said later, for man "everything." God as person, then, meant for Barth that he is a free being in act whose action is love.

In Anselm's Proslogion Barth found his answer to the problem of whether the reasoning of faith actually attains to positive knowledge of God. Barth understood Anselm to say that faith seeks to understand humanly what it has come to know by virtue of the gift of actual participation in God's mode of being.² But if God makes himself present to us as a person our knowledge of him is such that our own self-understanding as persons attains meaning in a new light. As Hans Frei, interpreting Barth, put it

On the relation of faith, it is God who is the analogue and man who is the analogate.

¹Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 14.

²Barth, Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum, transl. by Ian W. Robertson (New York: The World Publishing Co., Meridian Books, 1962), p. 17.

In faith and to faith the creature and not the Creator stands in need of explanation, of clarification by analogy.¹

The Christological doctrine of Barth suggested, then, that the pure subjectivity of God as person is made an object for human thought through the presence of Jesus in our history. Barth emphasized, however, that, in all this, the primary awareness that men have of God is that of being known, being recognized, by God Himself.

There is indication that Niebuhr thought it unnecessary to posit an analogy, or theory of analogy, in order to explain how Christians know God as person. It has been suggested that, perhaps, he did not see this as necessary because he was convinced that between God and man personhood was "common ground" both shared.² Whether this was his intention he did not explicitly say, but what clearly mattered more for him was the theme of transformation by which he intended to show that any prior knowledge we may have had about God or ourselves is converted, or transformed, by revelation. A theology that begins with revelation meant for Niebuhr that the only knowledge of God available in theology is knowledge gained in the concrete relation God establishes with man. His main argument with Barth was that to posit an idea of

¹Frei, op. cit., p. 52.

²Ibid., p. 101. See also Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, p. 115, and The Meaning of Revelation, p. 138f.

what God is in and of himself, ontically prior to his self-revealing, would be attempting to penetrate beyond the givenness of that relation. This effort would suggest that there is a further dimension to God's personhood not included in his self-revealing and that somehow we should try to find out what that is. It was Niebuhr's constant position that to go beyond the relational context in which faith is born, or in other words to seek God in isolation, as He is in Himself, is not to seek God as he is known by the Church.¹ He considered Barth's epistemological and speculative interests to be abstractions from the concrete relation in which God is known. When Niebuhr judged that Barth was becoming increasingly speculative, his interest in Barth steadily declined.

A major point of agreement, however, between Niebuhr and Barth was clearly the understanding that the primary awareness of the believer is that of being known, being valued, judged and loved. By attending to that action we are enabled to conceptualize the content of that action, which elicits at the very outset not a proposition about God but a direct address to God., i.e., "Thou are my God." Such a concept would, then, be the concept of a person.²

¹Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, pp. 112ff.

²Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 153. See also Barth, Church Dogmatics, IV, 1, pp. 3, 743.

2. Barth on the Concept of Man as Person.

"Man is made an object of theological knowledge by the fact that his relationship to God is revealed to us in the Word of God."¹ When Barth said, "To be a man is to be with God", this meant, for him, that the impossible has been made possible by virtue of the incarnation of God in Jesus. The impossible man, unknown to any other science, is made the real man, Jesus, and the possibility of knowing the impossible is now, for us, a reality. Theology concentrates on the real man revealed to us through Jesus as "man in relation to God."² The sovereign, free decision by God creates the being of man as hearer of God's Word-- this is the great "Yes" of God to man who without revelation can only hear "No."³ The answer to man's query, "Who am I really?" is simply this--one summoned by God. Barth maintains that to ask further, "But who is it that is summoned?" is a question that must not be raised because the only reality that precedes the one summoned is the One who summons, and then we are asking about God, not man.⁴ Our knowledge of who we are derives from our knowledge of God.

¹Barth, Church Dogmatics, III, 2, p. 19.

²Ibid., p. 139, also p. 134.

³Ibid., p. 143.

⁴Ibid., p. 151.

This position precludes, for theology, any systematic approach that would seek to discover the potentiality man may have prior to being called by God's Word. The history of man to which theology must attend, in other words, is the history that includes Jesus. In contrast, then, to Troeltsch's program for overcoming history by means of history Barth insisted that we overcome history by attending to the only "primal history" that exists--the relation to God in Jesus.¹ It is a history of divine graciousness and human gratitude, or ingratitude, the latter dispositions, i.e., gratitude or ingratitude, being the results of the inescapable fact that Jesus is part of our history, to be accepted or rejected. In either case the meaning of history now derives totally from his presence in it.

The real man, therefore, is discovered in Jesus, and Barth proceeded to define the reality that man is in the light of Jesus. The content of the concept of the real man includes act, freedom, and responsibility before God.² This knowledge of man derives from God's self-revelation and not from unaided natural reason. The central element is that our free, active and responsible being is "before God." Such is the knowledge of man as person. Barth acknowledged that man can know himself as person in a general way prior to revelation.

¹Ibid., p. 157ff.

²Ibid., III, 2, p. 194.

As man is, he is endowed with reason to perceive God and responsibility to answer him, he ~~is~~ capable of history and decision, he is therefore-- let us accept the term--personal, and in all these things he is thus able to be the partner of God.¹

What Barth insisted on, however, was that such knowledge falls short of the reality that is revealed in Jesus insofar as such human self-knowledge without the Christ-event is ultimately meaningless. Even after revelation this "general knowledge" must be regarded only as "symptomatic" in that the reality man is can be known solely through Jesus. In the volume on The Doctrine of God Barth stated that man is not a person in a real sense until he comes to know God in Jesus.

Man finds what a person is when he finds it in the person of God and his own being as a person in the gift of fellowship afforded him by God in person.²

Conclusion

As we will ~~see~~ in the discussion of Niebuhr's concept of person, the elements in Barth's notion of God and man as persons were essentially the same as Niebuhr's. Their differences as theologians lay not so much in the content of their concepts, then, as they did in their disagreement as to the Christological emphasis and the general epistemological question regarding the possibility or impossibility

¹Ibid., p. 202.

²Barth, Church Dogmatics, II, 1, p. 284.

of knowing God in his aseity or solely in his relation to man. For Barth, "He can be known of and by Himself."¹ For Niebuhr, God can be known by the Christian only as he relates to us and this means that the concrete relationship, i.e., faith, is a constitutive element of such knowledge.

The God who makes Himself known and Whom the Church seeks to know is no isolated God. If the attribute of aseity, i.e., being by and for itself, is applicable to Him at all it is not applicable to Him as known by the Church. What is known and knowable in theology is God in relation to self and neighbor, and self and neighbor in relation to God. This complex of related beings is the object of theology.²

Thus Niebuhr insists that the knowledge of God given in faith cannot be a stepping stone to further penetration of God's being in isolation from the concrete, living encounter with Him.³

With respect to Barth's Christological doctrine Niebuhr feared that it had, in a sense, become all of Barth's theology, that it turned theology into Christology.⁴ Moreover, Barth's alternative to the liberal Protestant thought of the nineteenth century, of which he considered Troeltsch one of the foremost

¹Ibid., p. 65.

²Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, p. 112.

³Cfr. Frei, op. cit., pp. 71-72 n. 15. Also Hoedemaker, op. cit., p. 80, where the author suggests that Niebuhr was opposed to the concept of analogy as proposed by Barth (see above p. 39) and, perhaps, considered an alternative, i.e., an "analogy of concrete response," which would a) avoid the exclusivity of Barth's Christological emphasis, and b) heighten the ongoing, transformative character of faith.

⁴See Barth, Church Dogmatics, I, 2, p. 123.

representatives in the twentieth century, was such a radical turn away from the subject, man, and toward the object, God, that whereas before it was a problem to get from man to God, now it had become, in Niebuhr's estimation, a problem of getting from God to man.

After reducing all experience and reason in the religious realm to pure subjective processes the Barthian movement succeeds only in arriving at a Kantian agnosticism in which God remains forever unknown. To rescue itself from this position it must fall back, as it is doing to an increasing extent, upon authoritarian dogmatism. The wholly transcendent God can enter into human life only by means of a revelation, which stands in contrast to all religious experience, to all history as well, and which can, in the last analysis, be accepted only as pure dogma. In effect, therefore, the theology of crisis is not so much a realism as a complete dualism which tends to become a dogmatism.¹

Niebuhr considered Barth's correction of the path that had been taken from Schleiermacher to Ritschl, then to Troeltsch, a needed one, but he thought Barth's solution to be an over-correction.² Barth had agreed that the man-centeredness of the nineteenth century illuminated human consciousness with the awareness of man's radical historicity, but beyond that simple fact he did not seem to think there was anything of further interest for the theologian to pursue in that mode of considering man. Niebuhr, on the other hand, thought that to ignore this awareness and to fail to

¹Niebuhr, "Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century," pp. 420-421.

²Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 250.

bring the truth it conveys to bear on the concerns of theology would not serve the purpose for which the corrective measure made by Barth was intended, namely, to be able to communicate the knowledge which Christianity claims not only to its own members but to all men. Thus, agreeing with Barth in many respects as to the content of Christian faith, especially that which pertains to the knowledge of God and man as persons, he was dissatisfied with the exclusivistic and dogmatic tendencies which made the communication of that content no easier than it had been before.¹ These tendencies not only created a communication problem but also involved, in Niebuhr's view, an underestimation of man's finitude and historicity as an integral part of the knowledge which revelation conveys. Niebuhr appears to have had greater sympathy with Troeltsch's endeavor in that regard.

Barth's profound effect on Niebuhr's thinking was evident throughout the latter's writing. The combination of Barth's with Troeltsch's influence led him to consider the reconciliation of their interests a task which, if he himself could not accomplish, was one that needed to be done.² How can faith in Jesus as God's own self-revealing action be a knowledge of absoluteness when faith in Jesus is grounded in the

¹Hans Frei sees Niebuhr's turn to Existentialism partly as his concern with the problem of communication. See Faith and Ethics, pp. 79-87, and 103ff.

² Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. x.

relativities of history? In search for a way to explain how this is possible, Niebuhr turned to many sources and from them gained new insights which led to the formulation of an alternative to Troeltsch and Barth.

C. Other Influences.

Niebuhr was not only profoundly influenced by the thought emanating from nineteenth and twentieth century Europe but also by the intellectual history of his own native land.¹ In his first book, The Social Sources of Denominationalism (1929), he attended to those elements in American Christianity which showed the particular problem of the Protestant churches to be the compromise of loyalty to God with lesser loyalties to self, denomination, and nation.² Concentrating on the sociological and economic forces at work in shaping the American churches as institutions divided by their secular interests, Niebuhr ended the study with a general moral appeal to good will and renewed effort to incarnate the ideal of Jesus "that they all may be one." Dissatisfied with this approach, he sought to discover the inner forces that were at work and which accounted for the dynamism and independence of spirit that lay behind the external, institutional development of the churches in America. Borrowing an idea from Bergson, he attempted to gain an understanding of the relation of the aggressive, spiritual and living force to the "spatializations" in which Christianity took visible shape.

¹Hoedemaker underscores the importance of the American experience of "sovereignty and pluralism" as "the native matrix in which Niebuhr's theology developed its distinctive character. While this double awareness of American Christianity was regarded by Niebuhr as something common to all men of faith its realization in American history of thought and life afforded him a unique perspective. See Hoedemaker, op. cit.; pp. 1-11.

²Niebuhr, The Social Sources of Denominationalism, p. 284.

This approach resulted in his second book, The Kingdom of God in America, published in 1937.¹

Perhaps the most profound effect of his re-studying the history of American Christianity was the rediscovery of Jonathan Edwards.² The latter's emphasis on divine sovereignty, on its pervasive presence in the totality of life, on the discovery of God through religious affections endowed by the magnitude of God's mercy with the grace to acquire a new "sense of the heart," were themes which grew in intensity in Niebuhr's own thought.³ While Niebuhr saw Edwards as a radically theo-centric theologian, he saw also that the latter's interest continually focused on the human problem of how faith in the Absolute was to be realized in the relativity and pluralism of American life. But Edwards' anthropocentric concerns took as their starting point the discovery of God, through his powerful grace, as all loving, all beautiful, and all good. This awareness of God, according to Edwards, was not to be secured by reasons of the mind.

¹Niebuhr mentions Henri Bergson and Karl Barth as major influences in developing his new approach. Cf. Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America (New York: Harper Torchbooks Edition, 1959), p. xii.

²Hoedemaker suggests that the rediscovery of Edwards was for Niebuhr one of the aspects of his rediscovery of God! See Hoedemaker, op. cit., p. 38.

³The pervasive presence of God in total life, the greatness of God and the uncompromising loyalty to his realm required by faith, are Edwardsean themes which seems to account for Niebuhr's attraction to Spinoza. Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, p. 89; The Responsible Self, p. 171; Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 56, 73f, 138.

Rather it was in the affective life, in the emotions, passions and will, in the consent of being to being, that life before a self-revealing God was to be lived. Indications of Edwards' influence abound in Niebuhr's writings.¹ The goodness of God, of which Edwards spoke so eloquently, was a profound problem for Niebuhr during the years of World War II especially, but that this continued to be the case was impressively communicated by the personal reminiscence of Daniel Day Williams, who wrote:

More than once he (Niebuhr) would ask, as if out of the depths of personal wrestling, "How can there be a good God?" He did not bypass Luther's question, "How can I get a merciful God?" That question was indeed always in his thought, but sometimes I felt that even more fundamental for him was the question of the goodness of God who rules such a tragic history.²

Niebuhr also found Horace Bushnell to represent a keen theological sense of the importance of relating Christian awareness of divine sovereignty to the daily tasks of life

¹See Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, especially Chapters 3 and 4; Christ and Culture, pp. 219-220; Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, pp. 32, 34, 52, and its Supplementary Essays, "Center of Value", p. 105; "Faith in Gods and in God", p. 116. Also the chapter on Jonathan Edwards in Christian Ethics, Waldo Beach and H. Richard Niebuhr. (New York: The Ronald Press, 1955), in which Niebuhr refers to Edwards as "America's greatest theologian"; and "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 250. See also James Gustafson's Introduction to Niebuhr's The Responsible Self, p. 26, and Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 33-38.

²Daniel Day Williams, "H. Richard Niebuhr: A Personal Memoir," Christianity and Crisis, XXIII, 20 (Nov. 25, 1963), p. 213. For Niebuhr's thoughts on the war see: "War as the Judgment of God," Christian Century, LIX (1942), pp. 953-955; and "War as Crucifixion," Christian Century, LX (1943), pp. 513-515.

in a complex and confusing world. Commenting on those in the nineteenth century revivalist movement who protested against static versions of divine sovereignty and who yet sought to be critical and dialectical in their reflections, Niebuhr wrote, "Of these Horace Bushnell was the greatest."¹ The resistance to concentration on doctrine and to systematization of faith, and the insistence on the living and dialectical character of Christian thought and life were aspects of Bushnell's thought which clearly influenced Niebuhr. Bushnell is listed by Niebuhr among the "theologians of Christian experience (in contrast to "theologians of Christian doctrine") with whom he preferred to be identified."²

Two other American thinkers were influential in helping Niebuhr formulate his thoughts regarding the social character of human existence and how that aspect was to be understood as part of the divine-human relation. The influence of George Herbert Mead, the social psychologist, and Josiah Royce, the philosopher, represent the liberal heritage which Niebuhr never entirely abandoned. The former, a behaviorist, considered that all human activity, including that of the mind, could be objectively observed and analyzed. From his studies he concluded that the human self was determined by its relations in a social pattern of responses. Although Niebuhr's understanding of human existence as relational

¹Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America, p. 193.

²Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 250.

and responsive was grounded in a theological interpretation of revelation, he found in Mead's writings a compatible set of concepts and expressions with which to convey his own ideas. In an article on the ego-alter dialectic and conscience Niebuhr borrowed heavily from Mead's concept of the social character of existence as self.¹

The development of the self's knowledge of itself, according to Mead, occurs through the mediation of others. Response to others is the context in which selfhood is shaped. The self is a system of relations and responses and can become an object to itself, i.e., known to itself, only by taking on the attitudes of others toward it, and this in the context of their shared experiences. Mead was not a Christian theologian and therefore did not deal directly with the implications of his theory for understanding selfhood in relation and response to God. Niebuhr considered Mead's interpretation of the social dimension of the self too narrow, that is, as if the self existed in only one society.

¹Niebuhr, "The Ego-Alter Dialectic," in Journal of Philosophy, XIII, 1945, pp. 352-359; also The Responsible Self, pp. 71-72, 76. G. H. Mead, "Genesis of the Self and Social Control," in The Philosophy of the Present, ed., E. Murphy (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1932); The Social Psychology of George Herbert Mead, ed., A. Strauss (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956); Mind, Self and Society, ed., C. W. Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934).

"The self does not deal with one 'generalized other' only but with many, and not all its 'others' are 'generalized'."¹ Mead's influence on Niebuhr involved an appreciation of the basic pattern of human existence as self in relation to other but without the limitations which, according to Niebuhr, Mead set on the social sphere in which the self exists. Niebuhr concluded, in the article mentioned above, that when the theologian conceives of the social aspect of the self in terms of the Holy Spirit as the "other" in the human conscience he sees man as consoled by the infinite loyalty of the other even while he is being called to fulfill infinite demands. In this article is seen the combined influence of both Mead and Royce.

Royce's thoughts on the triadic structure of interpretation, i.e., as involving self, other and object (the latter being a kind of third "self" in that it is the product of a previous interpretation), on the will to interpret as creating community, and on the act of loyalty to a cause as that which unifies the individuals in a community, influenced Niebuhr's conception and formulation of faith (as trust and loyalty) and of the character of the faith-community.² In Christ and Culture, for example,

¹Niebuhr, "The Ego-alter Dialectic," p. 354.

²See Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, p. 22; Christ and Culture, p. 253n; The Responsible Self, p. 83; Royce's Works: The Philosophy of Loyalty (1908); The Sources of Religious Insight, Chapter V, (1924) The Problem of Christianity, Vol. I, Lectures II and IV.

Niebuhr wrote, "Faith exists only in a community of selves in the presence of a transcendent cause."¹ More an idealist type of philosopher, Royce's emphasis on the individual and the decisiveness by which he becomes a genuine self earned from Gabriel Marcel the comment that Royce marked a transition from Idealism to Existentialism in American thought.² Niebuhr's own turn towards "Existentialism" was due partly to his concentration on faith as trust and loyalty which he expressed as having come from both experience and study.³ The latter source undoubtedly included the works of Josiah Royce, which he mentioned as having given him occasion for many "rich and fertile reflections."⁴

In Existentialism Niebuhr found reinforcement of his concern for the personal, the I-Thou relations between God and man and between men. Writing on Kierkegaard, he observed that the former had sought to rescue the irreducible subject-self from the illusions of objectivism and, in so doing, rescue Christianity from "the illusion that (it) can exist in an objective form so that anything objective can be Christianity. Only the subjective individual can be a

¹Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, p. 253.

²Gabriel Marcel, quoted on the jacket of Royce's The Religious Aspect of Philosophy (New York: Harper, 1958).

³Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 249.

⁴Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, p. 253n. See also Frei, op. cit., p. 78, n. 32.

Christian."¹ Niebuhr's attraction to Kierkegaard was more in terms of the emphasis the latter placed on subjectivity, freedom and responsibility in decision than on the qualitative otherness of God. Although Niebuhr also stressed the significance of the latter concern, it was not as pronounced in his thought as in the early Karl Barth. For Niebuhr it is in deciding (loyalty) that one becomes a self and, of course, the decision is not about things or ideas but rather about an other, a self.² For Christians this decision is not towards other Christians, or the church, or doctrines, or creed, but towards that infinitely holy other who confronts them as a self.

When Niebuhr's existentialism is described as a concern for the problem of communication this coincides with his very own interpretation of Kierkegaard whom he describes as "a witness to the witness."³ In the existentialist approach Niebuhr seems to have found a way of formulating the Christian faith-understanding of God so that one is pointing persistently to the object, God, and de-emphasizing, though not ignoring,

¹Niebuhr, "Soren Kierkegaard," in Christianity and the Existentialists, ed. Carl Michalson (New York: Chas. Scribner and Sons, 1950), pp. 35-36.

²See Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, pp. 47-48.

³Niebuhr, "Soren Kierkegaard," p. 42. Hans Frei, op. cit., p. 79, sees Niebuhr regarding the process of communicating, the communicated content, and the being that communicates as inseparable. This is clearly born out in Niebuhr's The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 141f.

the subjective experience in which the knowledge of God arises. Although God is present to the theologian only as he relates to him and the relational dimension is the necessary context in which thought about God takes place, the content is not simply the relation itself but rather the relation as relation to God. The problem of communicating this existential awareness is, on the one hand, the problem of resisting the temptation to go beyond the self-witnessing (or self-revealing) of God, to transcend the relation, to penetrate, as it were, the aseity of God,¹ and, on the other hand, of resisting the temptation to dwell exclusively on the subjective experience of this witnessing.

Niebuhr's major criticism of Kierkegaard was the latter's apparent lack of concern for the social dimension of the self. Kierkegaard's "passionate believer" seemed to Niebuhr an isolated self seeking in his decision to believe in a "solitary Christ" confronting a "solitary self."² This criticism also included an expansion of the notion of self as an historical being which, although pressed into decision in a crisis moment, a decisive Now, makes that decision as coming out of the past and going into the future. Christ is a "compresent" self who is remembered as well as expected, according to Niebuhr.³ For Niebuhr the absoluteness and otherness of God is not viewed as abstracted from society and history, but

¹Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, p. 112.

²Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, pp. 245-246.

³Ibid., pp. 246-248. This same idea is expressed in The Responsible Self, Chapters 2 and 3.

concretely present to both.

From among the existentialists it is the thought of Martin Buber that Niebuhr found most useful for expressing the manner in which knowledge of other persons comes about. "Selves are known in act or they are not known at all."¹ Persons are known insofar as they reveal themselves by their knowing activity. We know other persons in their knowing us, and in our responding to that action. The knowledge of person happens in the meeting, however, and self-revealing without response brings no genuine knowledge of person. But, Niebuhr insisted, the response is second and the revealing is first.² In Buber, then, Niebuhr found a means of expressing the radically social dimension which he found wanting in Kierkegaard, whose emphasis on the isolated self failed to take into account the human experience of encountering human selves in their self-revealing, of responding to that action, and in community raising the existential question, "How can we find a friendly God?"³ (In both The Meaning of Revelation and in Radical Monotheism Niebuhr stressed the importance of the communal assurance that God has indeed revealed himself to man as faithful,

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 146.

²Ibid.

³Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, p. 244.

friendly being.¹⁾

Paul Tillich was another important figure in Niebuhr's development. During the early 1930s, Niebuhr wrote two articles, and also a Preface for his translation of Tillich's The Religious Situation; in which he reflected upon a new movement of thought taking place in Europe (particularly Germany) and in North America. This movement, "religious realism,"² Niebuhr saw evidenced in such thinkers as Tillich, Barth, and D. C. Macintosh. He described this movement as an attempt to correct the anthropocentrism that began with Kant whose Copernican-like revolution in thinking restored man, particularly as a logical mind, to the central place in the cosmos. Niebuhr pointed out that

. . . religion and theology were subject-centered; they were valued not as revelations or systematizations of reality nor as efforts to transcend the limits of reason and of humanity but as aids in the struggle for existence, in the self-assertion of the human spirit, in control of life. The final fruit of this development is modern humanism with its elimination from religion of all but human objects and purposes.³

In response to this, religious realism faces the world and

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 141, "Assurance grows out of immediate perception plus social corroboration and out of neither one of these alone." Also, Radical Monotheism, p. 124, "...how is such faith possible? ...for most men another element is involved--the concrete meeting with other men who have received this faith, and the concrete meeting with Jesus Christ."

²Cf. Religious Realism, ed. D. C. Macintosh (New York: Macmillan, 1931). Macintosh defines "religious realism" in the Preface. Niebuhr's own interpretation is indicated above.

³Niebuhr, "Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century," in Religious Realism, pp. 415-416. Niebuhr's reflections on German and American approaches to theology can also be seen in his article, "Can Germans and Americans Understand Each Other?" in Christian Century, XLVII (July 23, 1930), pp. 914-916.

its problems with critical eyes, understanding the mind's limitations and the stark givenness of facts it seeks to understand, aware of failure and decline as much as success and progress. Most of all, religious realism, according to Niebuhr, attempts to treat religion as an independent experience and shifts its attention from the religious subject to the religious object, "from man to God."¹ He referred to this movement as an "objectivistic revolt" and found Karl Barth to be the extreme version of this. As was pointed out above, Niebuhr suggested that the results of Barth's approach led to a form of Kantian agnosticism from which it tried to recover by an authoritarian dogmatism.² In his translation of Tillich's book Niebuhr introduced to the English-speaking world a realistic approach that he considered more helpful in overcoming both the "anthropocratic" excesses of liberalism and the Barthian dogmatism.³ He refers to Tillich's "belief-ful realism" as

¹Ibid., pp. 416-419.

²Ibid., p. 421. See above p. 48.

³Paul Tillich, The Religious Situation (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, Meridian Books Edition, 1969. Originally published in 1932.) In an article written prior to the publication of his translation of Tillich's book, Niebuhr used the term "anthropocratic" to emphasize that aspect of anthropocentrism which seeks to control the objective world in terms of economic and political power. Tillich's work addressed itself directly to the destructive forces of capitalism and communism in modern society. One of Niebuhr's chief criticisms of Barth was the social impotency of his other-worldly emphasis. See "Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century," pp. 413-428.

an approach that is "willing to concede individuality and uniqueness to things," but which also discovers in same their reference to the transcendent and eternal source of meaning and ground of being.¹ Faith and realism belong together precisely because the object they attend to simultaneously demands that we transcend the experienced reality and rejects every transcending of reality.

"Belief-ful realism" expresses the true tension that exists in reality as experienced. Tillich's intention, as Niebuhr saw it, was to create a theological climate in which the terms of the crisis relation, the Wholly Other and the human self, could speak effectively to each other so that faith might become once again a transformer of culture. It seems that as Tillich's thought took shape in his systematic theology

his interest in a metaphysical system within which to view the concrete religious situation and from which to build a religious socialism caused Niebuhr to turn away from Tillich. The latter's insistence that "being itself" was the only non-symbolic reference to God and his rejection of the reference to God as a self, would seem to be, in Niebuhr's mind, an abstraction from the concrete relation in which God is known. For Niebuhr objectivity meant recognition of the self-presentation of God as person, and beyond knowledge of this there is nothing that can be thought or said which would

¹Niebuhr, "Translator's Preface," in The Religious Situation, p. 16.

not be a departure from revelation.¹

Among the representatives of religious realism in the twentieth century was the North American philosopher, D. C. Macintosh. His efforts to approach the subject matter of theology scientifically were viewed by Niebuhr as useful in their interests but unsatisfactory in their results.² Because of the value presuppositions, which suggested that theology can develop on the basis of knowledge of value gained prior to religious experience, the result was that knowledge of God gained in revelation would be little more than confirmation or development of previous knowledge about the value God must be in order to be God, rather than a radical transformation of all previous thinking. Niebuhr suggested a corrective to Macintosh's approach by proposing that the deity-value revealed in revelation is the active valuing of God.³

That has the value of deity for man which values him. The valuation of which man becomes aware in religious experience is not first of all his valuation of a being but that being's valuation of him.⁴

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 142-144. For an illuminating discussion of the conflict between Niebuhr and Tillich see Hans Frei, op. cit., pp. 82-84.

²Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," in The Nature of Religious Experience, ed. J. S. Bixler, R. L. Calhoun, H. R. Niebuhr (Freeport, N. Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1971. Originally published in 1937.) pp. 93-116.

³Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," pp. 113ff.

⁴Ibid., pp. 115.

Although Niebuhr's thought developed more and more toward emphasis on the personalist dimension of faith-understanding, the value-theory approach remained very much part of his thinking as is seen in the following passage from The Meaning of Revelation.

Whatever else deity may be in philosophical definition or in practical worship it must be value. The word God is a value term like the word friend...The essential goodness of the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ is the simple everyday goodness of love--the value that belongs to a person rather than the value we find in an idea or a pattern...We sought a good to love and were found by a good that loved us...Revelation is not the development and not the elimination of our natural religion; it is the revolution of the religious life.¹

The influence of Macintosh on Niebuhr's thought was part of that entire tradition stretching back to Ritschl and Schleiermacher whose intentions were basically the same, i.e., to approach theology empirically and to establish its independence in terms of the objective reality made available in the concrete relation between God and man in revelation.

Niebuhr found in the writings of the English theologian F. D. Maurice an expression of what he called in Christ and Culture, "the great central tradition of the Church."² Maurice's emphasis on the transforming effect of Christ on culture was viewed by Niebuhr as being in the tradition of the Fourth Gospel and the teaching of Augustine, Calvin,

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 188-190.

²Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, pp. 190, 218ff.

Wesley and Jonathan Edwards.¹ This tradition, according to Niebuhr, maintained a positive attitude toward creation, understanding the fall as a warping and misdirecting of man's nature and the relation of God to man in history as a dramatic interaction which brings about a reshaping, redirecting and revitalizing of man in his world to God's own greater glory. In terms of this tradition of "conversionism" Niebuhr considered Maurice the most consistent thinker in recent history.² The importance of a God-centered theology, the idea that conversion to God is a universal and present possibility, and the necessity of avoiding defensiveness in theology and, instead, taking a confessional approach were points of emphasis in Maurice's thought which Niebuhr noted and which appear to have had a significant effect on his own thinking.³

Summary

Sidney Ahlstrom rejected the idea of interpreting Niebuhr as a mediator between Troeltsch and Barth insisting that Niebuhr's thought involved considerations which were "at once more general (a renewed appreciation for classic Christian

¹Ibid., pp. 218ff.

²Ibid., pp. 224, 229. Niebuhr also viewed Maurice's influence as "pervasive and permeative." (p. 220)

³This is clearly implied in his remarks in Christ and Culture, but the influence of Maurice can also be seen in The Meaning of Revelation, and Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, especially in their emphasis on God-centeredness and the implied universality of the possibility of faith.

theology) and more personal (in answering my queries on this subject he referred to his own Türmerlebnis of justification by faith--his terms)."¹ In the same article, however, Ahlstrom maintained that Niebuhr's dissertation on Troeltsch was, perhaps, "the most important thing he ever wrote" setting the general direction of his career as a theologian. "His best known works all bear at least some marks of this influence."² Ahlstrom also noted that in the 1930's Niebuhr began a "lifelong protest" against the "Unitarianism of the Second Person" such as he found in Barth's Christomonism, and that the last quarter century of Niebuhr's labors involved a deepening of the concept of divine sovereignty, a concept central to the concerns of the crisis theology of Karl Barth.³ Niebuhr's own intention (cf. Preface to The Meaning of Revelation) to combine the main interests of Troeltsch and Barth was expressed in terms that indicated his conviction about the major importance of such an effort. Viewing Niebuhr's thought as an attempt to mediate between Troeltsch and Barth seems to the present writer not only appropriate but most adequate as a general framework for approaching Niebuhr, insofar as his writings appear to be a continuing response to the basic issues raised

¹Ahlstrom, op. cit., p. 215.

²Ibid., p. 214.

³Ibid., p. 215.

by these two thinkers. The elements of truth in their thought and in the thoughts of many others interacted continuously in Niebuhr's reflections as he creatively advanced toward his own solution to the problem of the relation between the absolute and the relative seen with the eyes of Christian faith.

The preceding summary of various thinkers and movements of thought influencing Niebuhr's theology indicates the breadth of his vision. It would, perhaps, be impossible to measure the exact degree to which the many sources he investigated influenced his thinking, just as it might also be impossible to account for all of the sources.¹ One thing is certain, however, and that is that Niebuhr's development involved an increasing emphasis on the personalist dimension of faith. By his own admission the existentialism of such a theologian as Rudolph Bultmann was an approach which Niebuhr favored and, although he expressed some reservations about Bultmann's emphasis on the virtue of obedience as the key to understanding Jesus, the empirical and ethical strain in Bultmann's theology caused Niebuhr to state that he felt "a great kinship with him in his intentions."² For Niebuhr the existentialist

¹Some idea of the breadth of Niebuhr's reading is indicated by the number of book reviews he published between 1931 and 1959. See Faith and Ethics, pp. 297-301.

²Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 250. See also Christ and Culture, pp. 22f.

approach in theology, as Frei pointed out, meant that the focal point of theological reflection was the concrete relation between the irreducible divine and human selves so that the knowledge which theology attempts to formulate is knowledge of persons as they are found in relation and not of essences or things or even values (such as the excellence of obedience, or love, or faith), which might be grasped in a purely theoretical manner, outside the context of the concrete relation.¹ The following chapter traces the development of Niebuhr's thought in this direction.

¹Cf. Frei, op. cit., pp. 80f. Also, Niebuhr, The Purpose of The Church and Its Ministry, pp. 112f; and Christ and Culture, pp. 15f:

CHAPTER TWO

TOWARDS A PERSONALIST THEOLOGY: A SURVEY AND ANALYSIS OF NIEBUHR'S WRITINGS

Near the end of his life H. Richard Niebuhr wrote a reflection on what he referred to as his "theological pilgrimage."¹ He stated that his thoughts over a period of thirty years appeared to him as having been not only a continuous but also a consistent development of basic convictions and concerns. His writings seem to confirm this. The following survey of Niebuhr's works is intended to show that those convictions and concerns led him to seek in the personalist dimension of Christian faith a means of expressing not only the content of the knowledge of God given in faith but also how that knowledge can assist the Christian in understanding and effectively relating to his world.

Briefly stated, Niebuhr's convictions were the absolute sovereignty of God, human lostness, sinfulness and idolatrousness, the miraculous character of faith, and the radically historical character of human existence. His concerns were chiefly for the continuous reformation of the church and the revitalization of the church's relation to the world. By the personalist dimension of faith is meant that aspect of faith which leads to the understanding of God's

¹Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," pp. 248-251.

relation to man and man's relation to God as being essentially the relation of person to person. It means, in other words, that the object of faith, God, and the subject, man, are understood and expressed primarily in terms of the experience of their existing in relation as persons. Thus the communication to other men of the knowledge involved in the faith experience, and the relation of the faithful to the world in general, are in terms of the meaning of existence as persons before the person of God.

The following presentation of Niebuhr's works will show that from the earliest expressions of his concern about the pessimism of a materialistic age to the final formulations of the faith conviction that "whatever is, is good," his thought is a consistent and constant development toward a personalist interpretation of faith in the absolute sovereignty of God. Niebuhr's career may be regarded as a pursuit of the answer to the question, "What does it mean to exist as a person under a sovereign, personal God?" As has been shown in Chapter One, his quest involved him in a continuous dialectic involved in the double awareness of the absoluteness of God and the relativities of human existence, between the interests of such great thinkers as Barth and Troeltsch, and between the other-worldly and this-worldly concerns of the church.

Niebuhr's writings will be examined below in three periods: early, middle and late. The early period covers the time from the completion of his doctoral dissertation on Troeltsch in 1924 up to his publication of The Meaning of

Revelation in 1941. This book and his writings during the decade following are the works that make up the middle period. The publication of Christ and Culture in 1951 and subsequent writings up to his death in 1962 mark the late period. This division of Niebuhr's career is not intended to suggest any radical changes in his thinking from one period to the next but is employed, rather, in order to group his works in terms of the increasing degree of emphasis on the personalist dimension in his thinking. At a very early stage Niebuhr showed a sensitivity for the evolutionary character of religious thought outside the pale of the church and the responsibility of Christian theology to recognize this same quality in its own reflections on the idea of God.¹ While there appears no reason to doubt that, from the start, Niebuhr's conception of God involved the notion of a personal being his writings indicate that in his growing concern to express the meaning of faith in the living God to contemporary men both inside and outside of the church the concept of God as a person became increasingly more central.

A. Early Period

In an article he wrote in 1925, entitled, "Back to Benedict?" Niebuhr described the fundamental problem to which he devoted much of his life's work.² Faced with the steepness

¹Niebuhr, "An Aspect of the Idea of God in Recent Thought," Theological Magazine of the Evangelical Synod of North America, XLVII (1920), pp. 39-44.

²Niebuhr, "Back to Benedict?" in The Christian Century XLII (1925), pp. 860-861. See also "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," pp. 250-251.

of the ideal of Jesus and caught up in the luxuriousness and self-indulgence of a materialistic age, Christians in the modern world, according to Niebuhr, were experiencing disillusionment and a resurgence of pessimism. The complexity of contemporary life, lack of restraint, softness, and materialism had all but completely disheartened those who recalled the demand of Jesus to seek first the kingdom of God. To overcome pessimism and compromise with the world Niebuhr recommended a "revivification and adaptation of the Benedictine order of life--a new monasticism."¹

But the Christian's return to simplicity, iron-clad discipline, and mysticism was not to be understood as a permanent escape from the world; rather it was to be a temporary separation to recover his integrity with the understanding that he would once again be faced with the choice between crucifixion and compromise. The Christian dilemma was the problem of being in the world but not of the world, of having, as it were, a dual citizenship and being caught up continuously in two-world thinking and in two-world ethics.² Niebuhr's argument in "Back to Benedict?"

¹Ibid., p. 860. Niebuhr compared the period between 300 and 600 A.D. to the present, pointing out that, while the concrete conditions may have been dissimilar in many ways, the attitude that led to monasticism was very much the same, i.e., "the pessimism, conscience-stricken consciousness of compromise, the need for hardness and for martyrdom in a comparatively soft time..."

²Niebuhr's persistent struggle with this problem can be seen in most of his writings. See The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 81-90, where he describes the paradoxical existence of the Christian in terms of the relation between faith and history. The Social Sources of Denominationalism and The Kingdom of God in America exemplify the nature of Niebuhr's dialectical approach to the problem.

contained certain characteristics that remained part of his thinking throughout the years. The fundamental framework of his thought was constituted by the tension between man's relation to God and to the world. His deliberations were directed to the concrete situation, the complexities of daily life, its sufferings and hopes, the loyalties and disloyalties of men as they are manifest in everyday, common experience. He brought to bear on the present the knowledge of the past as well as the expectations and anticipations that men expressed as regards the future. Niebuhr showed at this early stage of his career that, while loyalty to God was the ultimate concern, the means taken to reinforce that loyalty must include continuous involvement with the world. Solutions to the Christian dilemma were to be neither escape from nor compromise with the world but rather a saving activity involving the realization of the ideal of Jesus in the world. "It is not for love of self that the monk retires from the world but for the love of his brethren who may be saved by no other means."¹

In his first book, The Social Sources of Denominationalism, Niebuhr dealt with the problem of the ethical failure of the divided churches which he saw as the result of the compromising attitude of Christians toward the social and economic forces influencing their lives. In other words, the tension of being in relation to God and to the world had been, in

¹Niebuhr, "Back to Benedict?", p. 861.

Niebuhr's judgment, resolved in favor of the demands of the latter. When Christian faith is clothed in terms of philosophy, its ethics organized, and it is placed in the world as part of the world, it is compromised. The inevitability of this taking place does not make it any less an evil, according to Niebuhr, and when it is unacknowledged it is doubly evil.¹ The book then traced the history of Christianity in America in terms of the compromising effects of social and economic influences which led to the manifold divisions of the churches. The problem, as Niebuhr saw it, was one of loyalty. The basic loyalty to God, which is the essence of Christian life and by which human solidarity is possible, was not the governing principle throughout much of that history but rather loyalties to lesser causes, i.e., race, color, class, economic interests, nationalism, provincialism, etc., determined to a great extent the external shape that Christianity took in North America.²

In his concluding chapter, "Ways to Unity," Niebuhr rejected the alternatives of the Social Gospel and of

¹Niebuhr, The Social Sources of Denominationalism, p. 5.

²Niebuhr, The Social Sources of Denominationalism. The influence of Troeltsch, Weber, Tawney and others is evident throughout this work. See Niebuhr's acknowledgment of these and others in the Preface, p. vii.

crisis-theology as solutions to the problem of the church coming to understand itself as in but not of the world. The former was too this-worldly a solution, and the latter too other-worldly.¹ Niebuhr's final appeal was to the gospel ideal of Jesus which meant a renewal of the sense of brotherhood among men under the unifying Fatherhood of God. The examples of those who had followed that ideal most closely, e.g., the early Christian community of apostles and disciples, St. Francis and his followers, George Fox and his Friends, and "less dramatic appearances of the fellowship of love" found in hospitals, missions, prisons, etc., were recommended by Niebuhr on the basis of their having concretely penetrated into the world without having lost their essential loyalty to God.²

Although Niebuhr had not at that time formulated an adequate response to Troeltsch's philosophy of compromise, it was clearly a cause to which he was devoting his thought. The first hint of the direction his thoughts were to take is found in his indication that an answer lay in the understanding of the nature of that loyalty to which Christians are called and in the understanding of the nature of the object of that loyalty. Niebuhr's first book was an occasion for him to examine the this-worldly side of the

¹Ibid., pp. 269-274; 275-278.

²Ibid., pp. 282-283.

Christian dilemma. He thoroughly studied the lesser loyalties of the Christian American and the objects of those loyalties. In these he found the cause of division among Christians. His response to this was a moral appeal to good will and to a return to the gospel ideal. This answer, he admitted later, was "wholly inadequate."¹ But it seems important to observe at this point that Niebuhr's work in The Social Sources of Denominationalism was a significant step in what proved to be an attempt to express more clearly the Christian understanding of the meaning of existence as relation to God and to the world.²

The period between The Social Sources of Denominationalism and The Kingdom of God in America was, according to Niebuhr, a decisive one in "the formation of basic personal convictions and in the establishment of theological formulations of those convictions."³ During that time several of his writings

¹Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America, p. x.

²Niebuhr's Christ and Culture deals with the typical ways this relationship has been understood by Christians. Later it will be shown that Niebuhr did not consider it possible in this life to "solve" the dilemma. His work was devoted more to the cause of understanding more clearly the terms of the dilemma. His basic conviction of the sovereignty of God led to the further conviction that the solution lies ultimately with God.

³Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 248.

were concerned with the problem of method in theology.¹ Other publications were continuations of his struggle with the practical ethical problems of Christian response to the complexities of the modern world.² In a book co-authored with Wilhelm Pauck and F. P. Miller the contributions by Niebuhr once again stressed the permanent tension that Christianity deals with because it is to be in but not of the world.³ Niebuhr argued that Christianity must seek to maintain its independence from the world without failing to serve the world by leading it effectively to the peace and unity of children under One God.

Hence the church's strategy always has dual character and the dualism is in constant danger of being resolved into the monism of other-worldliness or of this-worldliness, into a more or less quiescent expectancy of a revolution beyond time or of a mere reform program carried on in terms of the existent order. How to

¹See Niebuhr, "Can Germans and Americans Understand Each Other?" in The Christian Century XLVII (1930), pp. 914-916; "Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century," in Religious Realism, ed. D. C. Macintosh (New York: Macmillan, 1931), pp. 413-428; translator's Preface to The Religious Situation by Paul Tillich (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1932), pp. vii-xxii; "Value Theory and Theology," in The Nature of Religious Experience, ed. J. S. Bixler, R. L. Calhoun, H. R. Niebuhr (New York: Harper & Bros., 1937), pp. 93-116.

²See Niebuhr, "The Irreligion of Communist and Capitalist," in The Christian Century, XLVII (1930), pp. 1306-1307; "Religion and Ethics," in The World Tomorrow (1930), pp. 443-446; "The Grace of Doing Nothing," in The Christian Century, XLIX (1932), pp. 378-386. (See Bibliography below for complete list.)

³The Church Against the World, W. Pauck, F. P. Miller, H. R. Niebuhr (New York: Willett, Clark and Co., 1935).

maintain the dualism without sacrifice of the main revolutionary interest contributes one of the important problems of a church moving toward its independence.¹

Niebuhr's persistent attempt to make ever clearer the characteristics of the Christian dilemma is evidenced during this period. While he engaged in that effort he also turned his attention to the movements taking place in the academic community in Europe and America. He detected a profound concern for the need of a method that would provide the means of setting forth the content of Christian faith in a way "which may represent not only the experience and the spirit of the twentieth century but contain within it as much of that which is common to all the centuries as it is possible for a philosophy or a theology to contain."² While Niebuhr clearly agreed with Karl Barth's interests as regards the re-affirmation of God's sovereignty as a fundamental principle in Christian theology and the

¹Niebuhr, "Toward the Independence of the Church," in The Church Against the World, p. 155. Niebuhr can be seen here combining the idea of loyalty to God and the revolutionary effect such loyalty has upon Christian life and thought. The revolution, however, comes from the divine ingression into the world and it has a double effect, i.e., it revolutionizes human understanding of God as well as of the world. The Christian is viewed by Niebuhr as standing in the midst of this double movement, transformed, as it were, with respect to both directions towards which the duties of his dual citizenship call him. The themes of conversion, transformation and revolution become increasingly more important to Niebuhr as his thought developed. (See The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 156f).

²Niebuhr, "Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century," p. 428.

consequent requirement that theology establish firmly its independence as a discipline, he did not agree with the other-worldly emphasis in Barth's approach and, later, Barth's Christological emphasis. In Paul Tillich's notion of "belief-ful realism" Niebuhr found an encouraging sign in the search for a theological method.¹ This approach, he thought, avoided the distancing from the concrete present, which he feared would render theology socially impotent.

One of the keynotes of this realism is emphasis on the apprehension of God in the present and the desire to understand history not by means of an impossible attempt to transplant ourselves into some remote past but by a resolute effort to wrest from contemporary experience its ultimate significance and revelational value... In realistic judgment of contemporary civilization and in the demand that religion be made effective in social life the religious realists move far away from the traditional Lutheran position which has been re-affirmed so often by post-war German theology.²

Once again Niebuhr showed his constant preference for an approach to the problem of the relation between faith and culture that preserves the paradoxical entanglement of the two, the intrinsic tension between them, the dilemma of duality in unity that they pose, and yet, is an approach that offers some hope of understanding and effectively

¹"Belief-ful realism" is a combined attitude. Faith transcends and realism rejects transcending. Experience of reality gives rise to such tension and therefore our attitude must include both terms of the tension. Niebuhr, Translator's Preface in The Religious Situation, pp. 9-24.

²Niebuhr, "Can Germans and Americans Understand Each Other?" p. 916.

communicating the meaning of existence in such tension. The issue became, in his mind, one of resisting the "either-orists" and the "nothing-butists" who insisted that Christianity had to seek its self-understanding in terms of religion or ethics.¹ While the answer, to be a Christian answer, must be in terms of Jesus Christ, who represents the living union between theo-centric and anthropocentric faith, the search for an answer in Christological thought results in the same issues breaking out again, i.e., the Jesus of history vs. the Christ of faith. Theology, Niebuhr insisted, must find a way to "apprehend in all their stubborn actuality the facts of history and the fact of God."

In the search for a method, one of the avenues Niebuhr considered was that of value-theory. The tradition of empirical theology that traces its lineage to Schleiermacher involves the basic conviction that religious knowledge is unique and this uniqueness is due to the fact that knowledge of God is a type of value-knowledge, or valuation.³ Niebuhr insisted, however, that the value which comes to be known in faith does not depend on knowledge of value gained prior to religious experience. The former is unique in the sense that it arises in the experience of the source of all values

¹Ibid., p. 915.

²Ibid., p. 915.

³Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," p. 112. (See above, pp. 64f.)

and valuing.¹ Niebuhr expressed these thoughts in the same year that his book The Kingdom of God in America was published. It is, of course the principle of divine sovereignty that Niebuhr applied to value-theory as the corrective principle which would make value-theory a useful means by which theology might develop an understanding of the content of faith.

In The Kingdom of God in America certain characteristics of Niebuhr's thought became more pronounced, and a stronger sense of direction was indicated. This book illustrates the dialectical character of his thought as he reflected upon the tension between religious faith and cultural realities. It demonstrates his inclination to deal with the extreme poles of that tension in order that the elements of truth contained in both might inform each other. Niebuhr shows his preference for beginning with these extremes as they are experienced, and for relating past and present expressions of them. Therefore, rather than a radical departure from his approach (in The Social Sources of Denominationalism), it may be regarded as a development of it involving a more inclusive viewpoint, that is, bringing

¹Ibid., p. 115. There is a slight hint of Niebuhr's movement towards personalist thought in his insistence that the deity-value in revelation is not that God exists but that he "loves us" and "judges us" and makes life worth living. The full implications of this are worked out in The Meaning of Revelation, especially pp. 175f.

into view the relation of the inner, spiritual motivations of Christianity to the external, organizational and institutional forms it adopted.¹ The character of Niebuhr's thought became increasingly more a pursuit of the full implications of the basic conviction of God's absolute sovereignty in the world.²

The Kingdom of God in America was the fruit of Niebuhr's reflections on (1) the contemporary intellectual climate created by crisis-theology,³ on (2) the fresh insights he gained from a restudy of the sources of American religious history, as well as the "Great Tradition" which included Edwards, Pascal, Luther, Calvin, Thomas and Augustine,⁴ and on (3) the concrete present with its urgent need for a fresh interpretation of how Christian faith is to be expressed in America's complex, changing culture.⁵

¹Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 38-41. Hoedemaker sees Niebuhr maintaining the basic method of observation and analysis used in The Social Sources but with a widening of the material and a relinquishing of the presupposition that social and economic forces exclusively determined the shape of faith in America. This view is warranted by Niebuhr's own comments in the Preface to The Kingdom of God in America, pp. ix-xvii.

²Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America, p. 17f.

³Niebuhr notes the insights of Karl Barth as significant to his studies during this period. Ibid., p. xii, and also "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 248.

⁴Niebuhr explicitly indicated that The Kingdom of God in America involved a restudying of the materials dealt with in his earlier writing. The book begins with a concise review of the Great Tradition to illustrate the precise nature of the problem of constructive Protestantism. Ibid., p. x, 17-44; also, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative;" p. 249.

⁵Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America, pp. 1-15.

The first area of reflection led him to seek the inner, dynamic and spiritual dimension of faith as it appears in history, and to focus on the religious ideas that determined the movement of Christianity in America. The second led him to discover the genuine roots of the religiosity expressed in the speeches and writings of religious leaders in American history. The third area of reflection led him to address his readers in terms of the need to view their current situation as (a) meaningful only if Christian life is seen as a living dynamism, an organic movement, (b) involving a continuous dialectic in which one moves both in the direction towards God and the world, and (c) demanding attention to the fundamental faith conviction that God is a sovereign living, loving God.¹ It is crucial for understanding the development of his thought from this period to note the importance of this last point. The sovereignty of God and what this means was at the very center of Niebuhr's theological concerns and it seems to the present writer that out of this pivotal concern emerged the insight that a personalist approach to theology was a key element in providing an alternative method for understanding and expressing the content of faith in a sovereign God present

¹Ibid., pp. xii-xvi. It was Niebuhr's conviction that apart from God being a living, loving sovereign the whole relation between Christianity and culture in America is "meaningless and might as well not have been."

to man in history.¹

The Protestant reformation, according to Niebuhr, was the revitalization of the insistence on the concretely present sovereignty and initiative of God.² It was, above all else, the re-affirmation of divine initiative, the free, active ruling of God over his creation upon which the reform movement was based. This aspect of faith underscored the vividness, absoluteness and immediacy of God's presence to the world, but, as Niebuhr pointed out, it left the reformers with the problem of human construction.³ How was this faith to be effectively worked out in the temporal order? America was an opportunity for the reformed faith to attempt construction without having to struggle against already established institutions or organizations. It was virgin territory. Niebuhr discovered in the history of American Christianity three stages of development, each stage characterized by a different emphasis on some aspect of the idea of "the kingdom of God."⁴ The seventeenth century was characterized by the dominance of the theme

¹In a sense Niebuhr's confessionalism, radical monotheism, and theocentric relativism, along with his personalism, are derivatives from the principle of sovereignty: Sovereignty, however, comes to mean transformation, and the revelation of God as person is the very heart of this meaning. (Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, Chapter 4.)

²Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America, pp. 17-18.

³Ibid., pp. 25, 30.

⁴Niebuhr insisted that the threefold scheme emerged out of the history itself and was not an imposition of preconceived ideas upon history. Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America; Preface, p. xiii, and Introduction, p. 14.

of confidence in God's sovereignty, the eighteenth by the conviction that, through Christ, God's kingdom was not only revealed but begun in a special way on earth, and the nineteenth was marked by an increasing emphasis on the approaching fulfillment of the kingdom.

As regards the first stage of American Christianity, Niebuhr pointed out that the sovereignty of God meant for the early settlers that God's will had to be sought in every endeavor and this will could be found only in God's own self-revelation. The Bible, according to Niebuhr, was agreed upon by all as the source of knowledge of God's will, but it was not the full embodiment of that will. The Bible was generally understood as a book of life, of movement, of history, and therefore the will of God is also to be found in that which lives, moves and exists in history. Sovereignty, in other words, included the active presence of God through his Holy Spirit.¹ The constitution of God's will on earth was grounded in the conviction that the relation of the Christian faithful to their God was a living reality and throughout the long history reaching back to the prophets and apostles that faith referred to the free activity of the sovereign One who ruled in the present as He had in the past, but who did not rule the present by the past.²

¹Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America, p. 61f. While the Puritans, according to Niebuhr, tended toward biblical legalism and the Quakers toward spiritual subjectivism, both were able to remind themselves that the sovereignty of God and what God's will was were the basic issues.

²Ibid., p. 65.

The second stage, dominated by the theme of the reign of Christ in the world, revealed the increasing awareness of American Christians that not only had God acted but God is acting in history. The revival of faith during this period, commonly referred to as the Great Awakening, was characterized by intensive preaching and teaching on the need to repent and seek forgiveness, but to do so because membership in the kingdom of God had provided them with the knowledge of the goodness of God.¹ Great emphasis was placed on the knowledge, immediate and personal, of the gracious activity of God in the daily lives of the people.² Niebuhr saw Wesley, Edwards, and their colleagues as having tried to bring together the components of divine initiative in revelation, the use of sacred scripture, and subjective experience, in educating the believers as to the content of the knowledge of God, and how that was to be related to the complexities of life.³ In writing about this period Niebuhr showed a profound appreciation for the thought of Jonathan Edwards. The latter's emphasis on the pervasive presence of God, the

¹Ibid., p. 105. Niebuhr's interpretation of the Great Awakening as emphasizing the goodness of God corrected some misunderstandings of that period. Sidney Ahlstrom, op. cit., p. 215; Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 33-38.

²Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America, p. 106f.

³Ibid., pp. 108f.

the goodness and beauty of God discernible in the world through the gift of a new sense of the heart, and the universal sweep of the grace which allows any man to participate in the knowledge of the glory of God, are but a few of the themes that re-appear in Niebuhr's later writings and seem to have had their origin, to some extent, in his rediscovery of Edwards.¹

The third stage of development in American Christianity was prepared for by the Great Awakening. The idea of the coming of the kingdom of God was intimately connected with faith in the living initiative of God.² With the growing conviction that God's positive action in the world was making possible what was impossible for man, nineteenth century America was marked by a confidence which took shape in what has become known as the Social Gospel movement.³ Niebuhr considered this movement to be the direct heir of the spirit of Edwards and others in the eighteenth century who preached the power and goodness of God. Gladden and Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr pointed out, were direct descendants of the evangelical tradition of the preceding century's confidence

¹ Ibid., pp. 101ff; 113ff; 136ff; 206ff. Niebuhr lists Edwards's book The Nature of True Virtue (1755) as one that greatly influenced his personal and intellectual formation. "Ex Libris," The Christian Century, LXXIX (1962), p. 754.

² Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America, p. 131.

³ Ibid., p. 151ff.

that Christ had risen and was coming again in glory.

Niebuhr concluded his reflection on the inner life of Christianity in America with a summarization of the effects of institutionalization and secularization or, as he put it, the "petrification" of the movement as a result of defensiveness.¹ The inner life must take shape in the external world but when it does there is often the loss of spontaneity and originality that was present in the first stages of construction. There is the tendency to rely on the institutions themselves to preserve the prophetic spirit, to trust in laws, rituals and symbols rather than in the divine initiative ruling human minds and hearts. Thus, Niebuhr observed, faith itself is no longer regarded as a living relation to God, but a mechanical one. Liberalism was an attempt to restore vitality to institutionalized faith, but it was different from the evangelical revivals in that the latter were revolutionary and the former evolutionary. In liberalism it appeared there was only one movement--forward. The dialectic was lost. There were no crosses to be borne, only crowns to be worn. Niebuhr saw the liberal movements of the nineteenth century as having had their roots in the revivalist movements of the eighteenth but liberalism came eventually to mean belief in progress itself rather than in the sovereign One without whom progress, much less life,

¹Ibid., pp. 168ff.

would not be possible. Such naive optimism evoked this comment from Niebuhr:

A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgement through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.¹

The Kingdom of God in America reveals how Niebuhr came to view the problem of the relation between Christian faith and existence in the world as "one to be resolved in terms of the primacy of divine sovereignty and man's utter dependence on God. These principles made up the ground upon which developed what the present writer regards as four fundamental themes of Niebuhr's theology: personalism, confessionalism, monotheism and relativism. Of these, the last two are easily identified in his writings during the 1930's,² and the first two are present, during that period, by intimation and implication. The true meaning of human existence in history, according to Niebuhr, must be found in the absoluteness and sovereignty of God. But in referring our history to God's sovereign rule we also discover that an essential part of that rule requires us to remain in the world and to participate in its redemption. How do we come to realize this? Niebuhr's answer is

...if we are to understand...Christianity we need to take our stand within the movement

¹Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America, p. 193,

²Ibid., passim; also in The Church Against the World, pp. 1-13, 123-156, and "Value Theory and Theology" in The Nature of Religious Experience, pp. 93-116, and "Man The Sinner," in Journal of Religion, XV (1935), pp. 272-280.

so that its objects may come into view. If we adopt a point of view outside it we shall never see what it has seen but only the incidental results of its vision, which we shall then seek to explain as due to some strange transmutation of political and economic interest.

Every movement, like every person, needs to be understood before it can be criticized. And no movement can be understood until its presuppositions, the fundamental faith upon which it rests, have been at least provisionally adopted.¹

Niebuhr suggested that this approach is objectivistic in the sense that by standing within the movement one is able to discover the ideal in the real, that one is interpreting Christianity out of itself, and not importing ideas that originated from without.² It is relativistic in the sense that it rejects the assumption that any one standpoint is a universal one. It requires that whosoever seeks to understand another, be it movement or person, must be willing to acknowledge that his position, with its particular interests and presuppositions, affords him only a partial, relative perspective of the reality of another's experiences. Niebuhr insisted that this works both ways, i.e., not only for those outside the Christian community wishing to understand it but also for the Christian wishing to understand another viewpoint. What was extremely important

¹Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America, pp. 12-13.

²Ibid., p. 14.

for Niebuhr, it seems, was that the Christian above all should understand this principle of relativity, for his self-understanding was that of being before an absolute and sovereign God. Niebuhr came to see that because the faithful Christian is turned both toward God and toward his temporal world he must avoid all defensiveness that seeks to justify his faith, its formulations, its institutionalizations, and seek, rather, to live in repentance, do his work and make his confession.¹ It is not simply the awareness of the relativity of our existence that requires us to be non-defensive and confessional in our approach, according to Niebuhr, but the awareness of relativity before God. Thus, confessionalism is grounded in monotheistic or theo-centric relativism. It is, in other words, God's absolute sovereignty that calls for this approach and it is also that which makes sense of the relativities of history.² Thus the themes in The Kingdom of God in America, of sovereignty, of Christianity as movement before God in history, and of a non-defensive attitude as a requirement of faith and proper mode of expression of faith, appear as seminal ideas which spring

¹Ibid., pp. 176ff.

²Ibid., p. xvi. This approach is emphasized in The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 40f, and Christ and Culture, p. xii.

forth in his later works explicitly as a radical monotheism, theo-centric relativism, and confessionalism.¹

In summary, then, Niebuhr expressed three convictions that had been fostered in him as a result of his study for The Kingdom of God in America.² First, that Christianity must be understood as a movement, it must be viewed in terms of its active, dynamic living qualities. Second, Christianity is dialectical movement, that is, it is neither a one-way movement either in an other-worldly or this-worldly direction nor is it dualism. Rather it is a movement in which men are caught up in a process which includes both love to God and love for the world. Because of the inclusiveness of this dynamic dialectical movement it can never come to rest in this life--"Only God can provide the synthesis."³ Third, Niebuhr became convinced that American Christianity and American culture could not be understood at all "save on the basis of faith in a sovereign, living, loving God."⁴ In the body of the book there is ample evidence

¹How these and personalism are interrelated can be seen in Radical Monotheism and Western Culture and the supplementary essay attached to that work entitled, "Faith in Gods and in God."

²Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America, pp. xiii-xvi.

³Ibid., p. xv.

⁴Ibid., p. xvi.

of Niebuhr's having focused on those aspects of Christian thought and life in American history that manifested a profound sense of God's active presence, power and goodness. One might suggest that there are intimations of a further conviction, later explicated by Niebuhr, that the key to understanding the nature of the relation between God and man in this dynamic dialectical movement is to be found by pursuing the full implications of those elements re-affirmed by the reformers as regards the object of Christian faith, namely, that God is free, God is active, God is faithful, and God is now engaging men in saving dialogue. In writings that were to follow, Niebuhr can be seen to have developed these very elements as the content of the concept of God as person.

B. Middle Period

What is the meaning of revelation? It seems that this question became for Niebuhr the focal point in which the central concerns of his previous writings were brought together and resolved. The subsidiary questions about the relation of the absolute and the relative in history, about the connection between scientific or objective history and religious history, and about the problem of natural and revealed religion are dealt with by Niebuhr in The Meaning of Revelation as all part of the general problem posed for the contemporary theologian faced with the challenge set for Christians by the increasing awareness of historical

relativity.¹ Niebuhr saw in the resolution of the problem of accounting for the knowledge of God within the limitations set by human historicity the need for combining the interests of Ernst Troeltsch and Karl Barth.² From the former he had learned to accept the relativity not only of historical objects but also of the historical subject, the observer and interpreter. From the latter he had learned the importance of re-affirming the primacy of God and human dependence on him as the foundational conviction upon which theology rests.

If revelation means both history and God, how can the relativity implied by the former and the absoluteness demanded by the latter be brought together without having, in the end, to choose between agnosticism or skepticism, on the one hand, and dogmatism, on the other? The theologian must begin with faith, Niebuhr insisted, for that is the limitation intrinsic to the Judaeo-Christian tradition, namely, that "one can speak and think significantly about God only from the point of view of faith in him."³ Luther's principle that faith and God belong together and Schleiermacher's and Ritschl's attempt to observe that principle is the Protestant tradition in which Niebuhr saw himself working. To give a true account of what

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 7-22.

²Ibid., p. x.

³Ibid., p. 23.

that tradition believes and understands it is necessary to begin with revelation, with the specific faith it brings about in the specific history in which it occurs. There is, then, the limitation of faith and the limitation of history. There is a further restriction, however, if one is to adhere to the tradition and that is to resolutely direct one's thoughts and speech, when thinking and speaking out of faith, toward the proper object of faith, toward God. In Niebuhr's mind the failure to adhere to this line of inquiry and expression, i.e., faith to God, had, in the past, led to the mistake of substituting faith itself, religion, creed or church, for God. A Christianity become overly concerned about itself seeks to establish the superiority of its views over the views of others, the sovereignty of its claims over the claims of others and, what is worse, the substitution of the sovereignty of its claims for the sovereignty of God. Because, for Niebuhr, Christian faith is faith in an absolute and sovereign God and because that faith is historic faith it was his conviction that the only approach possible for the Christian theologian was resolute confessionalism.

As we begin with revelation only because we are forced to do so by our limited standpoint in history and faith so we can proceed only by stating in simple confessional form what has happened to us in our community. How we came to believe, how we reason about things and what we see from our point of view.¹

¹Ibid., p. 40-41.

Defensive apologetics is a mistaken approach because it fails to observe both the sovereignty of God in faith and the radical historicity of human existence.

In confessing what happened, how it caused faith, how reason conducts its inquiries and what is seen from this point of view, the Christian theologian, according to Niebuhr, does not begin by asking what revelation ought to mean for all men in all times and places but rather he seeks to know what it means for Christians.¹

Niebuhr's presentation of history viewed from the perspective of a participant and from that of an observer and his analysis of speculative, impersonal objective reasoning in distinction from practical, personal affective reasoning, or "reasoning of the heart," are not so much distinctions he made on the basis of a philosophy of history or theory of knowledge as they are applications of the first self-evidencing principle of revelation, namely, that revelation is the emergence of God as a person.² The point of departure for Christians reasoning about their history and expressing the content of their reasoning with images from their remembered past and their present experience is the existing faith in which they participate as individuals and members of a community conscious of God

¹Ibid., p. 41-42.

²Ibid., pp. 153-154.

present to them as person. Thus, in the second chapter of The Meaning of Revelation dealing with Christian history and the third chapter on Christian reasoning Niebuhr can be seen applying the implications of the fourth and final Chapter, "The Deity of God," in which he stated the fundamental proposition upon which he based his whole approach to theology.

The most important fact about the whole approach to revelation to which we are committed by the acceptance of our existential situation, of the point of view of faith living in history, is that we must think and speak in terms of persons.¹

It is because the revelation of God is the revelation of a person that the Christian views his history as the history of a self. Revelation involves the disclosure of the personal nature of both God and man. It is because the central image in that history is the image of a person that the Christian reasons about himself in terms of personal images. Because the center of value is a person the Christian comes to view his moral life as a relation with a faithful, earnest, never-resting, eternal self so that all human actions are regarded as responses to God's action. Finally, all previous concepts of deity that men may have acquired are subjected by the Christian to the concrete experience of the person the nature of whose presence transforms every thought about deity.

¹Ibid., p. 143.

For Niebuhr the meaning of revelation, the problem of method in theology, understanding the relation between the absolute and the relative in history, the connections between objective and religious history, and the problem of natural and revealed religion were resolved ultimately in terms of the theological principle that to begin in faith, to start with revelation, is to think and speak in terms of the knowledge of God as person. As regards method, then, it must be grounded in the concrete experience of the divine person and guided by the elements that emerge in that experience as the content of the concept of personhood. Niebuhr did not begin with philosophy of religious history nor did he begin with a dogmatic assumption about the nature of God as he is in himself, in his aseity, or ontic priority. Rather he began with the concrete existing faith of the Christian as the expression of knowledge of God as he relates to the Christian. In so doing, however, Niebuhr does not exclude the principles of radical historicity or of the absolute primacy of God. He maintained that the viewpoint of the Christian is limited by his spatio-temporal relativity while he insisted on the absoluteness of the objective reality being regarded. Niebuhr acknowledged the understanding of God achieved through natural reason as he set forth the dimensions of God's own self-revealing which transformed that understanding. The meaning of revelation, for Niebuhr, is the meaning that emerges out of the experience of God as person. This meaning, in turn, directs

Christian thought with respect to the understanding of historical existence, the rational processes of memory and imagination, and interpretation of moral existence.

By attending to the personalist dimension of revelation Niebuhr was convinced that theology could avoid "the most prevalent source of error in all thinking and perhaps especially in theology and ethics," i.e., defensiveness, and also "the great source of evil in life," i.e., the absolutizing of the relative.¹ It is because God himself is known to men as their knower, their author, judge and only saviour, there is no room for defensiveness or for deifying the relativities of the finite world.

This, however, seems to be the consequence of the revelation of the person--truth is transformed and the search for continuous relations in the world which contemplative reason views is expedited and liberated. The pure reason does not need to be limited in order that room be made for faith, but faith emancipates the pure reason from the necessity of defending and guarding the interests of selves which are now found to be established and guarded, not by nature, but by the God of revelation whose garment nature is.²

The moral law, Niebuhr pointed out, is changed in its imperativeness in that man's transgressions are no longer viewed as going against his nature or his conscience or social life but rather as violations against "the eternal

¹Ibid., pp. viii-ix.

²Ibid., p. 175.

earnestness of a personal God."¹ The emergence of God as person transforms every aspect of our thinking, deciding and acting lives. This is the heart of Niebuhr's argument in The Meaning of Revelation. God comes to men not as the power men conceived as regards ultimate power in the universe but as a power that is manifest in infirmity and through death.² Again, the goodness of God is shown in his revelation as "the simple everyday goodness of love-- the value which belongs to a person" and this "puts our expectations to shame."³ All of Christian thought and life is "lived not before or after but in the midst of a great revolution."⁴ Part of this revolutionary existence involves thinking about the relations between the absolute and the relative, of objective and religious history, of natural and revealed religion in terms of the self-revelation of God as person.

Having made the self-revelation of God's personhood the key for approaching the apparent conflicts involved in man's double awareness of reality, i.e., that it is human and divine, temporal and eternal, finite and infinite, how does Niebuhr appear to have avoided the danger of his argument in The Meaning of Revelation becoming an apologetic or defense of the concept of personhood? Did he, perhaps, commit the grave sin of absolutizing the relative by suggesting that we must think in terms of persons?

¹Ibid., p. 166.

²Ibid., p. 186-187.

³Ibid., p. 189.

⁴Ibid., p. 183.

Confessionalism, conversionism, and the primacy of God were his safeguards in this respect.

In the first place, as Christians living in history we cannot say what revelation must mean for all men everywhere at all times but only what it means for Christians.¹ In the second place, an apologetic for the personhood of God would suggest that the revelation of God as person is a possession, but Niebuhr repeatedly emphasized the dynamic and revolutionary character of God's presence so that Christian awareness is subjected to continuous transformation. Finally, this transformation theme merely underscores Niebuhr's theocentric approach which understands that the primacy of God and man's dependence are the fundamental principles of Christian theology. Niebuhr's conviction of God's absolute sovereignty is reflected by his restraint in setting forth a definition of divine personhood. The elements comprising the conceptual content of the person of God are implicitly contained in The Meaning of Revelation, but they are overshadowed by the emphasis on conversion and its permanently revolutionary character.

This conversion and permanent revolution of our human religion through Jesus Christ is what we mean by revelation. Whatever other men may say we can only confess, as men who live in history, that through our history a compulsion has been placed upon us and a new beginning offered us which we cannot evade.²

¹Ibid., p. 41-42.

²Ibid., p. 191.

In terms of the task that Niebuhr had set for himself in writing this book it appears that his concern for the interests of Barth are expressed by the theme of transformation as the confessionalist approach showed the interests of Troeltsch. That God emerges as person in revelation and causes the individual and his community to reflect upon their history in terms of their own existence as persons seems, to the present writer, to have been the unifying principle in Niebuhr's proposal for combining those interests. It seems also that the elements comprising the content of the concept of divine personhood were not set forth by Niebuhr in a formal definition because of his deep concern for avoiding the substitution of conceptual content for concrete experience.¹

The Meaning of Revelation was published in 1941. America's involvement in the second World War was regarded by Niebuhr as a severe test of Christian faith in the sovereignty and goodness of God, in the conviction that the living God is present to us in our history. In three

¹ Ibid., pp. 125f. Niebuhr speaks of theology being concerned with the unique, unreplicative pattern that emerges in revelation and although concepts are necessary for external contemplation of life the real work of reason in Christian history is that of understanding in terms of persons. Niebuhr, in other words, seems to admit of a conceptual understanding involved when thinking and speaking in terms of persons but insists that the reasoning process must take place in the concrete situation of the present, self-revealing activity of God.

articles on the war Niebuhr attempted to set forth an interpretation of that tragic event which would be consistent with the conviction that God was, indeed, a living God and acting in history.¹ Niebuhr emphasized the sovereignty of God and the transformational effects of the cross of Jesus in helping men to understand how God could be present in such tragic history.

The crucifixion of Jesus was considered by Niebuhr as that action of God by which all thinking and speaking of God became subject to a total revolution of men's minds and hearts.² Faith in the sovereignty of God was "radically monotheistic" faith which meant that it viewed in everything that happened the action of the one, universal God.³ Not to see God in the war, according to Niebuhr, would be to abandon monotheism, divine sovereignty, faith in the resurrection.⁴ The problem of God, Niebuhr wrote in a later article, arises for the Christian as a practical, personal problem and its first question is not "Does God exist?" or

¹Niebuhr, "War As the Judgment of God," The Christian Century LIX (1942), pp. 630-633.

²Niebuhr, "War As Crucifixion," p. 515.

³Niebuhr, "Is God in the War?" p. 954. Here the term "radical monotheism" appears for the first time in Niebuhr's writing. This type of faith, Niebuhr wrote later, "dethrones all absolutes short of the principle of being itself. At the same time it reverences every relative existent. Its two great mottoes are: I am the Lord thy God; thou shalt have no other Gods before me--and--whatever is, is good." Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, p. 37.

⁴Niebuhr, "War As the Judgment of God," p. 632.

"What is the first cause, what the ultimate substance?" but rather "How is faith in God possible?"¹ How, in other words, does the ultimate power, the seeming void out of which everything comes and the enemy of all human causes and man-made gods become for man a trustworthy, faithful friend? Not only is this a question for time of war but it is a question men seek to answer in all times. The Christian answer is given in simple confessional form. It has happened. It is in our history. For Christians its occurrence involves a concrete meeting with Jesus Christ and the consequence of that encounter is "the reliance of a person on a person."² God becomes known as friend. Niebuhr pointed to the consequences of this knowledge of God given in faith as that of opening the mind to inquire about all of existence and of expanding the heart to embrace all of being, for all truth and all goodness is grounded in the ultimate being who reveals himself as truthful and loyal. "So," Niebuhr wrote, "faith in God involves us in a permanent revolution of the mind and heart, a continuous life which opens out infinitely into ever new possibilities."³

During the period after the war up to the time of his publication of Christ and Culture most of Niebuhr's writings

¹Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God," a Supplementary Essay in Radical Monotheism, p. 115-116. This essay appeared originally as "The Nature and Existence of God," in Motive IV (1943), 13-15, 43-46.

²Ibid., pp. 124-125.

³Ibid., p. 126.

were concerned with drawing out the full implications of radically monotheistic faith in terms of the church's relation to the world. Niebuhr's interests turned to the problem of how a faith that is subject to continuous transformation is to address itself concretely to the world without overemphasizing on the one hand, its role of pointing the world to God and, on the other hand, its role of responsibility to the world.¹

C. Late Period

Christ and Culture was an essay on "the double wrestle of the church with its Lord and with the cultural society with which it lives in symbiosis."² Niebuhr indicated that it was his intention in this work to further, as well as correct, the work done by Ernst Troeltsch in The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches.³ The corrective

¹Niebuhr, "Towards a New Other-worldliness," in Theology Today, I (1944), pp. 78-87; "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," in Religion and Life XV (1945-1946), pp. 106-117; "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," in The Gospel, The Church and The World, ed. K. Scott Latourette, (New York: Harper (1946), pp. 111-133; "The Norm of the Church," in Journal of Religion Thought IV (1946-1947), pp. 5-15; "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," in Theology Today III (1946), pp. 371-384; "The Gift of Catholic Vision," in Theology Today IV (1948), pp. 507-527; and "The Disorder of Man in the Church of God," Man's Disorder and God's Design, "The Amsterdam Assembly Series," (New York: Harper 1949) I, pp. 78-88.

²Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, p. xi.

³Ibid., p. xii.

principle which Niebuhr applied was that of regarding historical relativism in the light of theo-centric relativism, that is, to view the human condition of existing in space and time as meaningful only and precisely in terms of such existence being "under the governance of the absolute God."¹

Niebuhr traced the history of Christianity in the light of five types that appear as a result of the ways Christians had come to understand and express their dual relation to God and to the world: Christ against culture (e.g., Tertullian and Tolstoy), Christ of culture (e.g., Abelard and Ritschl), Christ above culture (e.g., Clement of Alexandria and Thomas Aquinas), Christ and culture in paradox (e.g., Paul and Luther), Christ the transformer of culture (e.g., Augustine and F. D. Maurice). The "enduring problem" that Niebuhr dealt with in this work is the problem of understanding how radically monotheistic faith, that is, faith in an absolute and sovereign deity before whom all values in the world are secondary and relative, and the rational and moral life of man in society, were to be related.² Although Niebuhr may be regarded as preferring the fifth

¹Ibid., p. xii. Niebuhr states here that "Isaiah 10, I Corinthians 12, and Augustine's City of God, indicate the context in which the relativities of history make sense."

²Ibid., pp. 1-11.

type, i.e., the relation of faith in Christ to life in culture is that of the former having a transforming effect on the latter, his concluding chapter in the book underscores the principle of theo-centric relativism which prohibits the assumption that there can be the Christian answer given by any one interpreter. He wrote

Yet one is stopped at one point or another from making the attempt to give a final answer, not only by the evident paucity of one's historical knowledge, as compared with other historical men, and the evident weakness of one's ability in conceptual construction, as compared with other thinkers, but by the conviction, the knowledge, that the giving of such an answer by any finite mind, to which any measure of limited and little faith has been granted would be an act of usurpation of the Lordship of Christ which at the same time would involve doing violence to the liberty of Christian men and to the uncompleted history of the church in culture.¹

Since men must and do decide, however, Niebuhr considered the following characteristics as those which accompany all such decisions. (1) They are made, according to Niebuhr, on the basis of relative insight and faith, but they are not relativistic; (2) They are individual decisions, but not individualistic; and (3) They are made in freedom, but not in independence. A dimension that runs through all three is that although decisions are made in the moment, they are not nonhistorical.² This meant that the human response to

¹Ibid., p. 232.

²Ibid., pp. 233ff.

Christ as God's self-revealing in the world was a truly relative and historical decision but its reference was to an absolute and eternal reality, that each person is fully responsible for his own action but his action is performed in communion with others who are also deciding and acting, and that although each decision is made freely it is made under the conditions of time and space and in the presence of a transcendent cause whose loyalty elicits trust. All this, again, is to be regarded as a process that takes place in the present moment but in reference to the past and to the future.

Each present moment in which we decide is filled with memories and anticipations; and at each present moment there is present to us some other¹ whom we have met before and expect to meet again.

Niebuhr understood Christ to be "compresent" with men in their decision-making. Christ is the self-revealing of a living God who has made history sacred by the "remembered actions of the one who inhabits eternity."²

In Christ and Culture the themes of divine sovereignty and goodness, of human historicity and relativity, of existence as that of selves in community, and of the transforming power of God's loyalty to men were brought forward once again by Niebuhr as the fundamental themes of Christian theology. Of special significance, however, in this consistent development of his thought is the account

¹Ibid., p. 247.

²Ibid., p. 249.

Niebuhr gave us as to how men have come to recognize in Jesus Christ the essence of the relationship that God has established with men. In a brief essay at the beginning of this book he attempted to reach a "definition" of Christ. "A Christian," he wrote, "is ordinarily defined as one who believes in Jesus Christ or as a follower of Jesus Christ." He belongs to a community of believers for whom Jesus is the key to understanding not only themselves and their world, but he is also the key for their knowledge of God.¹ Who is Jesus? In order for the Christian to say what his understanding of God is he must give an account of his understanding of Jesus. That Jesus is for the Christian a definite person whose teachings and actions and sufferings are of one piece, who is one and the same whether he appears as man of flesh and blood or as risen Lord, is a fundamental starting point for the Christian who speaks out of his actual history.²

Niebuhr acknowledged two difficulties in attempting to answer the question, Who is Jesus? The first was the "impossibility of stating adequately by means of concepts and propositions a principle which presents itself in the form of a person," and the second was that of saying, "anything about this person which is not also relative to the particular standpoint in church, history and culture..."³

¹Ibid., p. 11.

²Ibid., pp. 12-13.

³Ibid., p. 14.

He maintained, however, that one could point to the concrete phenomena in which the person of Jesus appears and in that way, imperfectly and inadequately, come to some knowledge as to the essence of Jesus' personhood. Niebuhr sought to do this by attending to the moral phenomena of Jesus' life, his virtues, i.e., the excellences of character exemplified in his words and actions and communicated to his followers. No single virtue of Jesus reveals his full essence as a person, nor simply the combination of them alone; rather each and all manifestations of Jesus as a moral being make sense in their apparent radicalism only in terms of their expressing his existence as relation to God.¹ In other words, according to Niebuhr, the knowledge of Jesus is grounded in the awareness given through his concrete moral life that he existed and exists as one who is in relation to God. Thus, the symbolic title "Son of God" was considered by Niebuhr as the expression which most adequately conveyed his existence as a person.²

But the essence of Jesus is revealed in his moral existence as having another side to it. Jesus is also regarded as one who existed and exists in relation to the world and to men in the world. As he manifested his trust and loyalty to God so also he demonstrated his love and faithfulness to men. His existence as a person was a

¹Ibid., p. 27.

²Ibid., pp. 27-29.

double movement--toward God and toward men.¹ In Jesus men come to see the meaning of personal existence as being grounded in the continuous movement toward God and toward the world and as not being the exclusive action of either one or the other. Niebuhr concluded by pointing out that even when theologies fail to do justice to this truth

Christians living with Christ in their cultures are aware of it. For they are forever being challenged to abandon all things for the sake of God; and forever being sent back into the world to teach and practice all the things that have been commanded them.²

What is of special significance in this moral analysis of the person of Jesus is the suggestion by Niebuhr that the uniqueness of his personhood can, to a certain degree, be apprehended in and through his concrete moral activity.³

Niebuhr's Christological thought reflected his consistent emphasis on the concreteness of the knowledge of God given in revelation. While it is true that for Christians this concreteness is focused on the definiteness of Jesus in history Niebuhr later rejected the notion that knowledge of God, concretely manifesting himself to men,

¹Ibid., p. 28f.

²Ibid., p. 29.

³Hans Frei, op. cit., pp. 104-116. Frei considers this suggestion by Niebuhr to be of singular importance for contemporary Christology and comments that this is an "isolated moment" in Niebuhr's thought where he moves toward a constructive theology and is, perhaps, a fruitful avenue through which to pursue historical and metaphysical analyses of personal being. (See below, pp. 229f.)

is exclusively restricted to knowledge of Jesus.¹ The depth and breadth of faith as an integral part of human existence became a dominant theme in Niebuhr's thought during the last decade of his life.² For the Christian it is true that the experience of Jesus is the illuminating event in which God is concretely revealed but Niebuhr seemed to move beyond this point in his thinking and indicated that the very content of that knowledge gained through Christ illuminated the whole of life so that the pervasiveness of God's presence to the world, the personal character of that presence, and the universality of the faith perspective are brought into view.

In Radical Monotheism and Western Culture Niebuhr presented his concept of the task of theology as developing the reason that accompanies faith and being critical of that reasoning. Theology begins with the knowledge of God given in faith and because this is its beginning it cannot "abstract discourse about the objective reality, God, from

¹Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," pp. 250-251. For an excellent treatment of Niebuhr's Christological thought and how he avoided "Christomonism," see L. Kliever, "The Christology of H. Richard Niebuhr," Journal of Religion, Vol. 50, 1970, pp. 33-57.

²Niebuhr, "Center of Value," in Moral Principles of Action: Man's Ethical Imperative, ed. Ruth N. Anshen (New York: Harper, 1952), pp. 162-175. (Also published in Radical Monotheism as a Supplementary Essay, pp. 100-113); "The Triad of Faith," Andover Newton Bulletin, XLVII (1954), pp. 3-12; "On the Nature of Faith," in Religious Experience and Truth, ed. S. Hook (New York: New York University Press, 1961), pp. 93-102; and The Responsible Self, especially Chapter 4, "Responsibility in Absolute Dependence.")

discourse about the subjective activity of faith, however the latter is defined."¹ While confidence in God is always present, reason inquires about what this confidence means in terms of man's relation to the world. Reason also seeks to understand more fully and more surely the things men come to believe about God as a result of their confidence in him.² What is most essential, however, to Niebuhr's way of thinking is that the theologian does his work as one who actively participates in the community of faith. Because the God of whom the theologian speaks is one known in faith, the method by which he seeks to develop his reasoning and be critical of that reasoning is distinct from other kinds of inquiry. Theology, according to Niebuhr, must pursue its own way independently but not in isolation from other rational inquiries in which men engage.³

By faith Niebuhr meant that "attitude and action of confidence in, and fidelity to, certain realities as the sources of value and objects of loyalty."⁴ The phenomenon of faith manifests itself, according to Niebuhr, in three ways.⁵ (1) The object upon which men place their confidence

¹Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, p. 12.

²Ibid., p. 14.

³Ibid., p. 15-16.

⁴Ibid., p. 16.

⁵Ibid., pp. 24ff.

is sometimes manifold, in which case faith is polytheistic. No one center of value makes life worth while or meaningful but rather there is a plurality of gods. (2) There is also that faith which exhibits itself as trust in and loyalty toward one center of value taken from experience of finite realities and elevated as first and highest in the order of valued objects, e.g., society itself. This "henotheistic" faith is manifested in history by such closed societies as those found in primitive cultures, in various forms of nationalism, and in cases where religious communities refer to God as the principle of their own closed concept of themselves as select or chosen. (3) There is, finally, a type of faith which Niebuhr suggested exists perhaps more as a hope than a datum, yet has been an actuality at certain times in history, although its appearance seems to have been mixed with elements of polytheism and henotheism. This third faith, radical monotheism, has for its value-center the One beyond the many, the principle of being itself. It is faith in God. It is not faith that God exists but rather it is confidence in and loyalty to the ultimate which has made itself known as faithful self.¹

To say that God makes himself known as First Person is to say that revelation means less the disclosure of the essence of objective being than the demonstration to selves of faithful, truthful being. What we try to point to with the aid of conceptual terms as

¹Ibid., p. 44.

principle of being or as the One beyond the many is acknowledged by selves as "Thou." The integrity that is before them here is the oneness of a self; it is the faithfulness that keeps promises, is indefectibly loyal, is truthfulness in freedom.¹

The chief thrust of Niebuhr's argument as regards the concrete experience in Judaeo-Christian history of the self-presentation of the one God is that the essence of that experience consists in the awareness of God as faithful.² The response to God is, in turn, faithfulness, i.e., trust in and loyalty toward the principle of Being itself as trustworthy and faithful to men and all created existence. Such response must be total, according to Niebuhr. As the source of existence is faithful, so must the self that responds in faith respond in the totality of his life. It is not a part of the self that responds to a partially present God, but the whole self encountering God in the totality of being.³ Radical monotheism has the effect of transforming human attitudes toward all life, all existence. All that exists is holy. Whatever is, is good.

Niebuhr viewed the existence of this kind of faith in the western world as one that struggled, and continues to struggle, with the problem of incarnating itself in the world as religion, as part of the political order, as a faith that exists in a world of science. Its failures in these areas are always signalled by the breakdown of

¹Ibid., pp. 46-47.

²Ibid., p. 47.

³Ibid., pp. 48ff.

confidence in the absolute fidelity of God accompanied by increasing confidence in lesser values, e.g., in doctrines or ecclesiastical institutions, in political systems, or scientific theories. Niebuhr concluded his discussion of radical monotheism as follows:

A radically monotheistic faith says to... all other claimants to "the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth," to all the "circumnavigators of being" as Santayana calls them: "I do not believe you. God is great."¹

The heart of Niebuhr's argument in Radical Monotheism was, as in the case of The Meaning of Revelation, that the revelation of God as person is that principle by which the human self comes to view itself and its world as standing in relation to the source of its own and all other existence wherein the sovereignty and goodness of the source radically transforms all meaning other than that which comes from the source itself.

In the Robertson lectures, posthumously published as The Responsible Self,² Niebuhr presented a critical analysis of man's existence as a moral being from the standpoint of one who believes that "man exists and moves and has his being in God; that his fundamental relation is to God."³ While this may have suggested that his approach was simply a Christian ethics Niebuhr insisted

¹Ibid., p. 89.

²Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

³Ibid., p. 44.

that the object of his concern was broader, that he intended to reflect upon human moral life in general but from a Christian perspective. It becomes clear in the course of these lectures that the central concern of his entire theological career was being worked out in terms of the moral question: How is it possible for man, existing as he does in the world, as it is, to respond in all his actions to the One living, loving, sovereign God?

Niebuhr's convictions regarding the sovereignty of God and the relativity of human existence, his radical monotheism, his personalist and confessionalist approach, all appear as guiding themes in his interpretation of moral existence. The symbol of response was considered by Niebuhr as a useful instrument of analysis from the standpoint of one who understood all action to be the action of God. His moral motto was: God is acting in all actions upon you. So respond to all action upon you as to respond to his action.¹ The image of man-the-responder (homo dialogicus) was suggested by Niebuhr as an alternative or additional way of conceiving man's existence as an agent in charge of his actions. The earlier images of man-the-maker (homo faber) and man-the-citizen (homo politicus) attended to those aspects of man's moral activity which demonstrated his awareness of being purposeful and goal-oriented, on the one hand, and law-abiding, on the other. By emphasizing the responsive character of human existence Niebuhr intended to shift attention from formal principles,

¹Ibid., p. 126.

such as the idea of the good or of the right, the lawful, to concrete values, to the existing actions that the self is suffering or undergoing. Man-the-responder asks "What is going-on?" in order to know what is the fitting action to take.¹ Niebuhr's summation of moral action was

the idea of an agent's action as response to an action upon him in accordance with his interpretation of the latter action and with his expectation of response to his response; and all of this in a continuing community of agents.²

Niebuhr's view of moral life as fitting response was intended to correlate with what he considered the question raised at crucial moments in the history of Israel and the early Christian community. They did not ask, according to Niebuhr, "What is the goal?" or "What is the Law?" but rather "What is happening?" and then "What is the fitting response to what is happening?"³ It is evident, in the light of Niebuhr's earlier writings, that the sovereignty of God was the theological principle that guided his approach to ethics.

In pursuing the implications of moral life as fitting response to actions suffered by the self Niebuhr attended to three aspects of human consciousness entering into

¹Ibid., pp. 60-61.

²Ibid., p. 65.

³Ibid., p. 67.

deliberations which precede the decision as to what is fitting. The first awareness is that of being a social self. "To be a self in the presence of other selves is not a derivative experience but primordial."¹ The human self, according to Niebuhr, is seen to exist as a social being in continuous dialogue with others wherein the communicative exchange always involves a third self, i.e., a prior interpretation which as such is something of a third self.² There are two "triadic" structures in which men find themselves involved in their interrelations.³ The first involves response to natural events in which the human self responds to other selves in all responses to nature. There is an exchange of interpretations and there is anticipation of further response both from nature and from social companions. The second triad involves human existence as being loyalty to causes. Here the self and his social companions participate in exchange of interpretation as to what cause deserves their loyalty and what response is fitting. Applied to the Christian context, the self and his companions are bound together by their loyalty to the cause of Jesus. In looking to Jesus, however, it is discovered that he points beyond himself to the ultimate person, the ultimate cause, and just as teleological ethics

¹Ibid., p. 71.

²Ibid., p. 79ff.

³Ibid., pp. 82ff.

moves to its final question, "What is the form of the ultimate good?" and as deontological ethics eventually asks, "What is the universal form of the law?" so in the ethics of response the triadic interrelationships of social selves lead to the question, "What is the universal community? What is the ultimate society in which the self lives and moves and has its being?"¹

The second awareness of the moral self is that of being in time. "Past, present, and future are dimensions of the active self's time-fulness."² In making the fitting response, Niebuhr suggested, the self bases its interpretations of what is going on in terms of what has happened in the past and what is the anticipated result in the future. Fittingness or unfittingness of human actions refers to the total movement in which the self knows itself as standing in the present, coming out of the past and moving into the future. Again, as in its consciousness as a social being, so in its awareness of being in time, the self attempts to understand the total context into which its responsible actions fit. In raising the question of the ultimate historical context the self is faced, finally, with the alternatives of interpreting life as a life of self-defense, of survival, of movement from nothingness to nothingness, of future with no future, or of interpreting the lifetime of

¹Ibid., p. 88.

²Ibid., p. 93.

the self as a history surrounded by eternal life. It is this revision of the historical mythology of death that Christianity, as well as other great religions, present to the time-full self. With this revision the self is called upon to redefine what is the fitting response and to interpret the actions upon it as responses to eternal action in a universal society of being.¹

The third feature of existence as a self is its awareness of being a unique subject, absolutely dependent in its existence, completely contingent, inexplicably present in its here-ness and now-ness.² After interpreting all the actions upon it which define its physical and mental limitations as well as its religious fate there remains the inescapable awareness that the self is unique; flung, as it were, into existence and held there by some radical action which is not its own and cannot be identified with the manifold actions surrounding it in the finite world. What action has brought about that which I am? What, finally, is the interpretation that the self places upon that radical action? This interpretation is, in the final analysis, an attitude of trust or distrust towards that which causes the self to be that which it is. The self ultimately lives in faith. Faith, according to Niebuhr, is the attitude of the

¹Ibid., pp. 106-107.

²Ibid., p. 109.

self in its existence toward all existences that surround it, as beings to be relied upon or suspected.¹ But response to the radical action by which the self is, is the qualifying element in all its interpretations and reactions to the finite world of actions in which it is involved. As in the case of its interpretation of existence as a social being and as a time-full being, so in its interpretation of its existence as dependent being the self seeks to discover the fittingness of action in terms of an ultimate context. When the self learns to trust the radical action by which its own subjective integrity is established, it becomes one self in its responsive life and interprets all actions upon it as expressive of One intention or One context. Thus, the responsible self affirms: God is acting in all actions upon me.²

For us who are Christians the possibility of making this...interpretation of the total action upon us by the One who embraces and is present in the many is inseparably connected with an action in our past that was the response of trust by a man who was sent into life and sent into death and to whom answer was made in his resurrection from the dead.³

In his analysis of man as a moral being Niebuhr is seen to have applied to each dimension of man's self awareness, i.e., as a social self, a time-full self, and a dependent self, the radically monotheistic principle of God's absolute sovereignty. In each case the universal and ultimate context

¹Ibid., p. 118.

²Ibid., p. 126.

³Ibid., p. 143.

is viewed in terms of its providing meaning to man's existence as one in which the fitting act, the responsible act, is that which is made with reference to a universal, eternal, and loyal being. Niebuhr's God in The Responsible Self is the good God, the pervasively present God, of Jonathan Edwards, the God who was "in the War," the God who came to appear in the moral life of Jesus, the faithful First Person of the radical monotheistic tradition.

In his ethics Niebuhr was convinced that "all life has the character of responsiveness,"¹ and as a Christian he believed that the life of the self has been illuminated by the revelatory action of the source of all life, an action which, as he wrote in The Meaning of Revelation, is "the emergence of a person."² Only in the presence of, and in response to, this person can man hope to avoid the error of self-defensiveness and of absolutizing the relative. Christian life, as all life, according to Niebuhr, is lived in the presence of the divine person the knowledge of whom is given; it is a grace, a gift. But the question remains at the end of this survey of Niebuhr's writings: What is the content of this knowledge of God as person? That God is conceived of as a person in Niebuhr's theology, there is no question. What constitutes the concept of God as

¹Ibid., p. 46.

²Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 153-154.

person, however, is not immediately apparent and the task that has been set for the following section is that of attempting to explicate those elements which appear as constants in Niebuhr's thinking and speaking in terms of persons.

CHAPTER THREE
THE CONCEPT OF PERSONHOOD

Introductory

It was noted earlier that Niebuhr was aware of two major movements of thought influencing the theological climate of his day and that his own thinking appears to have been an attempt to mediate between them.¹ There was, on the one hand, the so-called liberal movement of thought with its characteristics of confidence in science and emphasis on religious experience as empirical datum for developing understanding of man's existence, and there was on the other hand, the counter-movement to re-affirm the absolute primacy of God and utter dependence of man on God's own free initiative in illuminating man as regards the meaning of his existence. The former way of thinking focused on man and his world. Among the recent discoveries made in that approach was the radical relativity of human knowing itself; that is, the spatio-temporal point of view of the human subject conditions his knowledge of reality.² The latter, God-centered approach, however, insisted on the

¹See above, pp. 6f and pp. 70f; also The Meaning of Revelation, pp. xii-x, and "Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century," in Religious Realism, pp. 413-428, and "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 248.

²Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 7f.

necessity of acknowledging the absolute freedom and sovereignty of God who, in confronting man, makes man aware not only of his own relativity but of God's absoluteness, not only of reality as it appears in its conditionedness but also of the unconditioned conditioner, of the Real as infinite and eternal.¹

A major problem for theology, as Niebuhr saw it, was that the Christian is caught in a dilemma by virtue of the fact that his understanding of God, of himself and his world rests on the content of knowledge involved in the experience of revelation, an event in history, in the limited context of particular space and particular time, and yet it is an understanding that involves the self-disclosure of an infinite, eternal and absolute Being. The question which Niebuhr considered crucial for the contemporary Christian theologian was this: How can revelation mean both relativity and absoluteness, history and God?² It seemed that eventually one had to choose between the position that the knowledge gained in revelation involved a special grace and its communication was an exceptional mode of discourse carried on in an exclusive context among those in possession of such grace, and the position that, as history, revelation involves

¹Ibid., pp. 17f, 156f, 173f, 182f.

²Ibid., p. 59.

knowledge no different from that which is acquired through other historical events, that is, relative knowledge, the communication of which is itself subject to the relative conditions of the knower. In the case of the latter Niebuhr saw the presence of a tendency toward agnosticism and skepticism with respect to the possibility of any real knowledge of God. The former position, however, was burdened by a dogmatic exclusivism which made meaningful communication beyond a closed community practically impossible.

As Schleiermacher had learned to accept the critique of religious thought in the light of Kantian idealism and turned to an empirical method in theology which reasoned about God in terms of the concrete experience of faith so now, according to Niebuhr, the modern insight into the radical historicity of human existence requires the theologian to adjust to this new knowledge and deal faithfully with it as he continues to set forth the knowledge involved in that historical faith which confesses that the absolute One beyond the many, the source of all being, the cause of all existence, has made itself known in Jesus Christ.¹ Rather than regard the rise of relativism as a threat to faith Niebuhr considered its limiting effects as complementing the effects resulting from God's self-revelation. The double relativism, i.e., of the particularity of history and of

¹Ibid., pp. 8f, 22f, 38f.

faith, require that theology take a confessional approach, namely, that it proceed

only by stating in simple, confessional form what has happened to us in our community, how we came to believe, how we reason about things and what we see from our point of view.¹

It seems moreover that Niebuhr considered the modern consciousness of relativity an asset rather than a liability for theology because it served to bring home even more forcefully certain all too often forgotten aspects essential to reflection on the fundamental convictions of faith. God's self-revelation is not an occasion for boasting, Niebuhr insisted, nor for claiming superiority over other religious traditions. God is not a possession of the church or of a theological system but rather he is a living God whose presence in our history convicts us of our poverty, sin and misery as it convinces us of his own infinite goodness.² In a sense, then, Niebuhr was suggesting that the heightened awareness of human relativity gained from discoveries in the natural sciences, sociology, and history served to underscore the necessity of taking the confessional approach in theology. The knowledge of God given in faith impresses upon the believer that his thinking and speaking are actions of a sinner rather than a saint. Faith as well as history impress upon us the fact that our thought and speech are expressions

¹Ibid.; p. 41.

²Ibid., pp. 41-42.

not of what all men must believe or know but rather what is believed and known by particular men in particular times and places with a particular faith.¹ Theology must be confessional because it begins with the twofold conviction of God's absoluteness and man's relativity. Faith convinces men that God alone is absolute and all else, including our thoughts and speech about God, is relative. Modern scientific and historical reasoning reinforce the conviction about the relativity of finite existence without necessarily imposing doubt as to the existence of a universal, absolute reality.

Relativism does not imply subjectivism and skepticism. It is not evident that the man who is forced to confess that his view of things is conditioned by the standpoint he occupies must doubt the reality of what he sees. It is not apparent that one who knows that his concepts are not universal must also doubt that they are concepts of the universal, or that one who understands how all his experience is historically mediated must believe that nothing is mediated through history.²

The knowledge of God given to man in faith is subject to continuous conversion. Revelation involves men in a "permanent revolution," a metanoia, which does not end in this life. Thus, in Niebuhr's thinking, theology which reflects on this knowledge is not only limited to a confessional approach but also in its very confession is subject to continuous revision and correction. The knowledge

¹Ibid., p. 42.

²Ibid., p. 18.

of God's absoluteness as it is revealed to men demands this. How, then, is it possible to speak of God, to convey knowledge of the absolute, with any consistency or clarity? Is there some common ground between the absolute and the relative, between God and man in the world, so that although reference to it will admit of limitation and allow for continuous reformation the reference will nevertheless genuinely reflect knowledge of God? It is the present writer's position that Niebuhr focused on the content of the knowledge of God as a person in order to answer those questions. It seemed to have been his understanding that the personalist dimension of faith was a key which enabled Christian theologians to think and speak in a manner appropriate to the experience of God in revelation and also enabled them to avoid certain dangers of the past which involved either relativizing of the absolute or absolutizing of the relative. The revelation of God as a person was the cornerstone of Christian faith, according to Niebuhr, and therefore theology must begin with reflection on that crucial fact in its history.¹ In so doing, however, it sets forth the understanding of the relation between the absolute and the relative as well as the related terms themselves as primarily a function of practical reasoning, the reasoning of selves.

¹Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, p. 45; and The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 142-143.

But it is not merely because it is part of our rational nature to reason practically that we must think as "selves." Rather, the object which confronts us in the concreteness of our world determines our thinking, that is, because the object gives rise to trust and loyalty, to faith, we begin to reason as selves.

The revelation of God in history, as we shall see, is the revelation of a self.¹

Revelation means the point at which we can begin to think and act as members of an intelligible and intelligent world of persons.²

Revelation is the emergence of the person on whose external garments and body we had looked as objects of our masterful and curious understanding. Revelation means that in our common history the fate which lowers over us as persons in our communities reveals itself to be a person in community with us.³

In Niebuhr's thinking it was the content of the knowledge of God as a person that allowed the theologian to think and speak in such a way as to account for the absoluteness of God and the relativity of man, the traditional understanding of the sovereignty and freedom of God's rule over the world, and the new knowledge of the radical historicity of man in his apprehension of the self-revealing divine ruler in time and space. It becomes quite clear that the thrust of his writings from The Meaning of Revelation on indicates that, in Niebuhr's thinking, for the Christian to say "God" is to say "person", and the content of this thought, so expressed, is the crucial

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 88.

²Ibid., p. 94.

³Ibid., p. 153.

determining factor in the account given of the history and reasoning of Christian faith.

The following section will be an attempt to set forth what appears in Niebuhr's writings to be the content of the concept of God as a person, as he conceived it.

A. The Concept of God as a Person. God is a person. This conviction was, for Niebuhr, the cornerstone of all radical monotheistic faith.¹ The event that gives rise to such faith is a moment in which the ultimate makes itself known to man as a faithful self, as an "I," a faithful, truthful being.² It is the revelation of the principle of Being as First Person. It is the occasion of man's natural faith which, distrustful of the ultimate environment, is transformed into radical faith, that is, a trust in and loyalty towards the ultimate cause which is no longer a meaningless void or an enemy of all human causes but rather a companion and friend.³ Radical faith is an attitude toward the source of all existence, including the existence of the self; it is an attitude of reliance on a person.⁴

¹Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, p. 45.

²Ibid., pp. 45-47.

³Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God," in Radical Monotheism, p. 122.

⁴Ibid., p. 125.

The development of integrated selfhood begins as the ultimate unity in the universe, the oneness behind everything, is disclosed as a faithful being.¹ Faith is the response of trust in the One beyond the many who emerges in the midst of the many as their knower, author, judge and saviour.²

Niebuhr spoke of this knowledge of God as a person given to faith in revelation with a twofold emphasis. On the one hand, the emphasis was on the knowledge of being confronted, that is, faith was considered as a response to the awareness of the human subject that he is being known, being judged, valued, acted upon. But this suggests that there is no positive apprehension of God, rather only the acknowledgement of some being behind the action that causes awareness of being acted upon.³ On the other hand, Niebuhr spoke of the positive recognition of God as a person in terms of the relational characteristics which the human self has learned to identify in its experiences of other finite selves.⁴ But this suggests that human knowledge of God is

¹Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, p. 47, also The Responsible Self, p. 86.

²Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 152-153.

³Ibid., pp. 152f, 183f.

⁴Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 143-147; also Radical Monotheism, pp. 45-46, and The Responsible Self, passim.

anthropomorphic, that thinking and speaking of God in terms of being a person is due to the exigencies of the human situation, which includes the search for understanding of the meaning of existence as person.¹ How did Niebuhr propose that these two aspects of our awareness of God could be brought into meaningful relationship so as to provide a unified concept of God? Before suggesting how he did this it may be useful to summarize briefly the nature of the problem as it seems to have presented itself to him.

The emphasis on the confrontational aspect of our knowledge of God was more objectivistic in its approach and emphasized the idea of divine transcendence in explaining the nature of faith. The emphasis on the relational dimension, however, was more subjectivistic insofar as it seemed to suggest an immanent ground for grasping the divine as a personal reality addressing us at that level of consciousness in which we have previously learned to identify ourselves as subject-selves, or persons. The latter approach represented a large part of the thinking that characterized the nineteenth century Protestant theology from Schleiermacher to Ritschl. Niebuhr acknowledged the value of the latter

¹Hans Frei argued that Niebuhr vacillated between "a dualism which can give no specific content except 'confrontation,' to the concept (of God's personhood) and a relationalism that makes the content of the idea anthropomorphic." *Op. cit.*, p. 102. (See below pp. 230f.)

movement of thought insofar as it restored emphasis on the traditional principle that "God and faith hold close together," but rejected the tendency toward over-emphasizing faith and turning theology into "faith-ology," or "religionology", or, as Ritschl had done, viewing God in terms of man's own natural awareness of himself as being a superior value over against nature. In these shifts of attention from the God of faith to faith in God Niebuhr detected the persistent error of defensiveness which meant for him that theology became concerned with establishing the superiority of Christian faith rather than with the sovereignty of God. As consciousness of the relativity of human existence increased theology became subject to the destructive influence of that reasoning which reduced religious beliefs to mere subjective strivings to establish the superiority of man over the rest of nature. The idea of God as an objective reality gave way to the idea that God was a projection of the human self. Theology was then faced with the challenge of such thinking as represented by Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and Freud.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century a revolt against the subjectivist tendencies of the anthropomorphic mode of thought occurred. An attempt to restore God-centered thinking in theology emphasized the confrontational dimension of faith over against the relational dimension. This shift of emphasis centered on the idea that our knowledge of God is grounded in the miraculous event of God's self-revealing action in Christ. It meant that the miracle of Jesus, and

no prior understanding of our existence as selves, is the sole source of our knowledge of God as a person. The knowledge of ourselves as persons is derived from the knowledge of God as a person and this latter knowledge is given in the moment of confrontation. There is no prior ground in our natural reasoning about ourselves upon which this knowledge of personhood is based. In other words, the human situation, which involves consciousness of existing as selves in relation to other selves, is not the basis for reasoning about God as a person. Rather the concrete confrontation of man by the Person of God in Christ is the sole basis for such reasoning. This position, as we have seen, was held by Barth who eventually sought to overcome the epistemological dualism it suggested by an ontology "which acknowledges the absolute ontic priority of the subject of revelation, insisting on its priority to revelation while asserting that in revelation the subject becomes genuine object for analogical knowledge."¹ In this way our knowledge of ourselves as persons is determined by our knowledge of God as a person, it is God who is the analogue and man who is the analogate.

While Niebuhr agreed that the subjectivistic tendencies of much nineteenth century thought needed correction he also regarded the objectivism of the Barthian movement an over-correction. It became his purpose to show that adherence

¹See Frei, op. cit., p. 86.

to the principle invoked by Luther, that God and faith hold close together, required Christian theology to pursue its course of reasoning by attending to both the subjective activity of faith, the anthropocentric dimension, and the object of that faith, God, the theocentric dimension, in expressing the content of knowledge of God as a person.¹

It was axiomatic for Niebuhr that Christian theology was reflection on God and man (self and neighbor) as they are found in relation.² This meant for him that neither the objective term of the relation nor the subjective term were reflected upon in isolation. But it also meant that such reflection was primarily reflection upon the meaning of existence as interpersonal and therefore the essential content of such knowledge consisted of elements which conveyed the meaning of divine and human existence-as-person. Both the one who confronts and the one who is confronted are conceived in terms of personal existence and the relation itself is understood as personal relation.³

While there is evidence in Niebuhr's thought which would indicate the real determining factor in such a personalist approach is the human desire to have meaning placed upon a

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 21f, and Radical Monotheism, pp. 121.

²Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, p. 112.

³Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 144-146.

life already experienced as personal there is the further insistence that the revelation of God as a person did not mean simply the fulfillment or satisfaction of any natural desires but rather the radical permanent transformation of all prior understanding of personal existence and even the transformation of these desires themselves.¹ Thus the relational dimension is qualified by the confrontational dimension so that while we may reflect on God as one who establishes his relationship to us as a personal being his being as a person confronts us in such a way as to place us in a situation of continuous conversion.

It is the present writer's position that Niebuhr consistently presented the content involved in the knowledge of God in this manner. It appears to have been his understanding that knowledge of the divine person is such that confrontation is as necessary a dimension of such knowledge as is the relational dimension. Both aspects together account for the concrete transformation that takes place in human thought and speech about God. While there is positive content in the concept of God as a person the elements that make up that content involve human reason and human expression in a continuous conversion process. In

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 182-191. The 'deity' of God is presented in the final chapter of this work as the transforming effect of God's self-revelation on all previous thoughts and desires with respect to the nature of God. He singled out three in particular; unity, power and goodness.

other words, Niebuhr's approach suggests that reasoning in faith involves reflection on certain constant elements that constitute the concept of God as a person, but those elements are a dynamic composite which by themselves cannot become a defense. Rather, reflection on God as a person in terms of what is known through his confrontation of man and the relationship it establishes requires that human reason continuously enlarge upon the initial understanding given in the revelatory event. It was clearly Niebuhr's thinking that the failure of theology to avoid becoming defensive, absolutizing the relative, or to resist the temptations against agnosticism and skepticism, was in part a failure in attending to the personalist dimension of faith. It was his understanding that the knowledge of God as a person given in revelation involved human reason and human life in a permanent revolution.¹ All knowing, willing and acting, the total life of the human self, is subject to continuous conversion and correction.² What the elements contained in Niebuhr's concept of God as a person were and how they functioned as permanent correctives are the two issues that will be treated in the following presentation. The first thing to be said before making this presentation is that while the conceptual content as proposed is considered to

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 183.

²Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, p. 125.

be faithful to Niebuhr's thinking it does not appear in his own writings in the explicit manner or order that the present writer has chosen to present it. It is also necessary to point out that the elements which will be put forward as the constant components implicit in Niebuhr's thought on the person of God are conceptual elements of what is, according to Niebuhr, grasped as a concrete unity in the experience of faith. Thus, while thinking and speaking of God as a person involve formulation and expression of conceptually distinct items of awareness they point to a unified and unifying reality confronting the thinking and speaking subject and eliciting the latter's response to it as one.¹ For Niebuhr, radical faith is that attitude of the human self which accepts the ultimate One beyond the many, the principle and source of all being, as a reality to be relied upon and loyal towards so that the existence of the self and all existences surrounding it are understood to be meaningful and worthwhile.² In reference to the object of such faith human reason takes note of the following four constants whenever it reflects upon the presence of that reality which causes the subject to confess in faith "Thou art my God": 1) act, 2) freedom, 3) faithfulness, and 4) dialogue.

¹Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, pp. 47-48.

²Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, p. 118; also "Faith in Gods and in God," in Radical Monotheism, pp. 116f, and Radical Monotheism, pp. 321.

1. God is one who acts. One of the four basic constants that appear in Niebuhr's reflections on God as a person is that of act. In his first book, The Social Sources of Denominationalism, Niebuhr's concern was directed toward the failure of Christianity in its loyalty toward God. The sins of compromise were regarded as failures to recognize that righteousness is to be found in the divine aggression, that is, in the action of the one who rules over the world in sovereignty and freedom.¹ This active presence of God in the world was the fundamental faith conviction re-affirmed by the Protestant reformation. In his next work, The Kingdom of God in America,² Niebuhr considered that restoration of the vivid awareness of God's, active and immediate presence in ruling over the world as the key purpose of the reform movement. While the reformers struggled with the problem of externalizing this awareness in the concrete, visible ordering of life they understood their actions as attempts to respond to the ever-present, ever-active God. In 1932 Niebuhr suggested that the deliberations of Americans concerning their involvement in the conflict between Japan and China should include serious reflection on the fundamental Christian conviction that God is acting in history and that America's decision regarding

¹Niebuhr, The Social Sources of Denominationalism, pp. 5f.

²Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America, pp. 17, 24.

its role in that conflict be determined by this conviction.¹ Pervading his argument in The Meaning of Revelation is the notion that Christianity understands its history as one in which God has acted concretely and continues to act concretely.² God is active as knower, judge, author, valuer and saviour--and Christian faith is response to the awareness of this divine activity at the beginning and end of all human life.³ Niebuhr stressed the moral transformation that occurs as a result of God's self-disclosure as a faithful, never-resting, eternal and infinite self.⁴ Because God becomes known in faith as a living, contemporary, active being addressing man in every new moment the moral law is universalized and intensified so that the believer learns to regard all of being as the action of God and moral life as response to that action, i.e., as response to God.⁵ The moral imperative is transformed, according to Niebuhr, into the indicative.⁶

Revelation of God as a person transforms natural reasoning about deity in that notions about divine being as

¹Niebuhr, "On the Grace of Doing Nothing," in Christian Century XLIX (1932), pp. 378-380.

²Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, Chapters 3 and 4.

³Ibid., pp. 152-154.

⁴Ibid., p. 166.

⁵Ibid., p. 168.

⁶Ibid., pp. 170f; (See also The Responsible Self, p. 126.)

unity, as unconditioned, as the absolute beyond the relative, are transformed by the concrete presence of a oneness that meets man in and through the many, as an unconditioned being that conditions, as an absolute that relativizes.¹ The knowledge of God as a person given in revelation is the knowledge of an active being whose very activity enters into human reasoning about God in such a way as to transform every aspect of thought gained prior to revelation. If natural reason required that deity be strong, that it be powerful, reasoning in faith requires that divine power be found in weakness, suffering and death.² If natural reason demanded that deity be good, reasoning in faith demands that the goodness be recognized as one that exceeds all human evaluation, as a goodness that is pure activity.³

The theme of God as an ever-active being present in all events was vigorously set forth by Niebuhr in his articles on the war.⁴ In these he identified the authentic Judaeo-Christian awareness of God as that which sees God at work in everything. To see God in the war, according to Niebuhr, is to stand where Isaiah and Jesus stood. It is to have faith in God as sovereign act; to believe that he acts

¹Ibid., pp. 175f, 183f.

²Ibid., pp. 186f.

³Ibid., p. 189f.

⁴See reference to war articles on pp. 104f above.

even in death as one who raises men from the dead.

The human activity of faith is response to agency and power.

Faith, in other words, always refers primarily to character and power rather than to existence. Existence is implied and necessarily implied; but there is no direct road from assent to the intellectual proposition that something exists to the act of confidence and reliance upon it. Faith is an active thing, a committing of self to something, an anticipation. It is directed toward something that is also active, that has power or is power. It is distinguished from belief both on its subjective side and with respect to that to which it refers. For belief as assent to the truth of propositions does not necessarily involve reliance in action on that which is believed, and it refers to propositions rather than, as faith does, to agencies, and powers.¹

Faith is the response to a strange happening, a meeting, an action in concrete history, which has caused men to interpret all of history as the action of one eternally active being. To live in this faith is to be caught up in a continuous intellectual and moral activity that finds God in all the many actions which make up human experience and to which man responds in his daily living. As we saw earlier, Niebuhr suggested in his book Christ and Culture, that by attending to the moral activity of Jesus one can grasp to some extent the person of Jesus. In so doing, one discovers that the essence of Jesus's person involves

¹Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God," pp. 116-117.

a dynamic double movement of God to man and man to God. The faith in God which arises in the event of Jesus is faith that involves the believer in that dynamic activity. Personal existence is "relation to God."¹ In the faith which has Jesus as its central image, the Christian learns to interpret all of life as participation in the activity of God. The emergence of radical monotheistic faith in Western culture, according to Niebuhr, occurred in that moment when God became known as the one who is present and acting in every event.² Radical faith is the conviction that in all the actions which surround the self there is present a steadfast, truthful being. "Radical faith becomes incarnate insofar as every reaction to every event becomes response in loyalty and confidence to the One who is present in all such events."³ In many of Niebuhr's references to God as a person the component act appears as an essential element.

2. God is one who acts freely. The second constant that appears in Niebuhr's thought about God as a person is that God is not only one who acts but one who acts freely. For Niebuhr the sovereignty of God meant that God rules over the world in absolute freedom. It is solely by God's own

¹Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, pp. 11-29.

²Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, pp. 38-48; also The Meaning of Revelation, p. 136; and The Responsible Self, p. 167.

³Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, p. 48.

initiative that the world exists and that he has chosen to make himself present to it.¹ To speak of revelation, according to Niebuhr, is not to speak in terms of discovery, as Columbus discovered America, but rather in terms of confrontation, of the initiative of an other taking upon itself the decision to manifest itself, to make itself known. The knowledge of a person begins with the free act of the other initiating encounter. "Knowledge of other selves must be received and responded to..." but the response is second.² Thus, with respect to the knowledge of God given in faith the emphasis is on the independence of action on the part of God in bringing about knowledge of him as a person.

Niebuhr spoke of God's self-presentation in terms of being a surprise, a sudden, unexpected event, a miracle.³ The independence of God's action in revealing himself as a

¹Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God," pp. 122f; The Responsible Self, pp. 121f, 173. See also The Kingdom of God in America, chapters 2 and 3, where Niebuhr discusses the freedom of God's creative and redemptive action as a central theme of the Reformation and also the major motif of 17th century Protestantism in North America.

²Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 145-146.

³Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 152, 183; Christ and Culture, p. 254.

person is such that it represents a "surd."

Here the great surd enters. What is the absurd thing that comes into our moral history as existential selves, but the conviction, mediated by a life, death, and a miracle beyond comprehension, that the source and ground and government and end of all things--the power we (in our distrust and disloyalty) call fate and chance--is faithful, utterly trustworthy, utterly loyal to all that issues from it? ¹

Not only is the object of faith before us as an absolutely free being acting independently of our human expectations but it is present as the source of freedom, as a liberating force opening the human mind and heart to ever-new possibilities.² In the midst of all our efforts to discover a being or beings upon which we can rely for ultimate meaning and value the One who reveals himself appears not as something we can possess, or as something that belongs to the structure of things, or something that meets our expectations, but rather as a being so utterly independent of us that coming to trust in it involves us in a moral and intellectual emancipation and transformation without limitation.³

¹Niebuhr, "Christ and Culture", p. 254.

²Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God," p. 126

³The general thrust of Niebuhr's argument in The Meaning of Revelation is that the emergence of God in our history as a person is so radically independent of our own natural expectations as to plunge us into a "permanent revolution" of our speculative and practical reasoning processes, of religious life in general, and, as he later stated, of total life. Cf. The Meaning of Revelation, passim, especially Chapter 4; and Radical Monotheism, p. 43.

This, however, seems to be the consequence of the revelation of the person (God)...truth is transformed and the search for continuous relations in the world which contemplative reason views is expedited and liberated.¹

For Niebuhr, then, the experience of God as a person is subjectively as well as objectively understood as an experience of freedom. In the presence of an absolutely independent being which elects to make itself known by concretely acting in man's history the latter is set free to explore a world whose ground, source and goal may be found in every event. For the Christian this conviction about God being present in every action emerges as a result of the memory of Jesus, which event, as pointed out above, is a miraculous surd in our history. The faithfulness of God toward the one who put his trust in him is evident through events that permanently revolutionize human understanding as to the unity, power and goodness of deity.²

The theme of transformation which permeates Niebuhr's reflection on the effects of God's self-revelation in Jesus is rooted in the understanding, given in faith, that the action of God is utterly independent of human thought.

The action of God is such that divine unity is another manner than we desired, divine power is present as destroying

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 175.

²Ibid., pp. 183f.

our expectations of power so that we cannot come to the end of the road of our rethinking the ideas of power and omnipotence, and divine goodness puts all our expectations to shame as we are caught up in a great turmoil of transvaluation.¹ It is one thing to come to the knowledge of God as the one who is acting in all actions upon us and quite another to learn that this radical action is a gracious invitation to trust in that action and to be loyal to the entire realm of being in which that action is present. The conceptual component of freedom points to that aspect of the experienced unity which gives rise to the believer's awareness that the one who confronts him does so in a manner independent of the latter's own actions or thought and this independence is a permanent factor throughout the trustful dialogue that follows upon the initial confrontation.

Here we might pause to take note of the intimate relationship that exists between the components of Niebuhr's concept of God as a person. Although we can separate them in order to consider their special quality as conceptual components, they are concretely experienced as a unified reality.² Only when the gratuitous and omnipresent act is grasped as a faithful being initiating genuine dialogue, does the reality of God as a person present itself to

¹Ibid., pp. 184-191.

²Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, pp. 46-48; The Responsible Self, pp. 144-145, 175; The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 135-136, 146-147.

consciousness and, even then, its dynamic aspect defies exhaustive formulation for its final dimensions await completion in that moment when the response of the human self has been lifted beyond its limitations by virtue of the very power which has called it forth.¹ For Niebuhr therefore, the concept of God as a person arises out of the experience of God as one who is not only acting in all actions upon us but who is also acting freely so that every action is a new and unexpected unfolding of himself.²

Finally, the emergence of God as a person in our history causes us to view our existence in time as a continuing encounter with one whose presence enables us to revise our understanding of history from one that is an ultimately death-dealing environment to one that is apprehended as a history surrounded by eternal life.³

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. xiii-ix, 132-137.

²Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God," pp. 125-126.

³Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, Chapter 3; also The Gospel For a Time of Fears, (Washington, D.C.: Henderson Services, 1950), The Meaning of Revelation, Chapter 4, Christ and Culture, pp. 249-256. These writings, in general, convey the idea that the divine person confronting us in time is such that our ability to reinterpret the past and the future is enhanced beyond measure, for the knowledge of the absolute freedom of God's activity, made known in revelation, frees us from the limitations of inherited interpretations and predictions. The crucial character of the component of freedom in our concept of God as a person stems from the radical transforming effect that his freedom has upon us.

3. God is one who acts freely as faithful being. The third constant in Niebuhr's thought about God as a person is that of faithfulness. In God's free, self-revealing act the human self is made aware of the faithfulness of God toward man and all existences surrounding man. The ultimate environment is faithful.

Now a strange thing has happened in our history and in our personal life: our faith has been attached to that great void, to that enemy of all our causes, to that opponent of all our gods. The strange thing has happened that we have been able to say of this reality, this last power in which we live and move and have our being, "Though it slay us, yet we will trust it."¹

Niebuhr pointed to the revelatory event recorded in Exodus 3, 1:1f., and saw there the motif of radical faith being sounded, namely, that being can be relied upon to maintain as well as give value in a universe of interdependent values.² God's "I am" means not only that he is the principle of Being but that the principle of Being is First Person. From that point on, Niebuhr observed, no event in nature or in social history occurred but what it was regarded by radical faith as the action of the faithful One. The postulate that God is faithful remained after every hypothesis about the mode of his faithfulness had broken down.³ The integrity of the One beyond the many

¹Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God," p. 122.

²Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, p. 43.

³ibid., p. 42.

is the integrity of a faithful self and man's response in faith is, according to Niebuhr, the development of integrated selfhood.¹ To find a faithful person present in all that happens is to live an integrated life. This notion was also set forth by Niebuhr in his articles on the war mentioned earlier.² There the context was one of formulating the conviction of radical monotheism that God is acting in all events, even tragic ones. Not only does he act but his actions are those of a faithful being whose presence in the death and suffering of combatants gives ultimate meaning and value to those events. This is the significance of Niebuhr's reference to Jesus as our Rosetta stone in this regard, for in his own suffering and death men are made to see that God is faithful. It has become our fundamental conviction that "God is faithful, that He kept faith with Jesus Christ who was loyal to Him and to his brothers; that Christ is risen from the dead that the Power is faithful so Christ's faithfulness is powerful..." and in all this it becomes clear to us, Niebuhr went on to say, "...that faithfulness is the moral reason in all things."³

In our moral life the ultimate decision to be made is between trust and distrust toward the radical action by

¹Ibid., p. 47.

²See above p. 144.

³Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, p. 255.

which each of us exists as a unique self, as an "I," in our particular histories with our particular mental, moral and physical make-up.

No matter how responsible I may be in my various roles as member of societies and holder of offices I am not a whole, responsible self until I have faced up to this action, interpreted it, and given my answer.¹

The Christian facing up to, interpreting, and answering this action issuing in the self is "inseparably connected with an action in (his) past that was the response of trust by a man who was sent into life and sent into death and to whom answer was made in his resurrection from the dead."²

With Jesus we are able to address that radical action as "Our Father." The revelation of God in Jesus has elicited the confession of faith which is not a proposition¹ stating that God exists but rather the direct address "Thou art my God."³ A constant element in the concept of God as a person put forward in Niebuhr's works is, then, the component faithfulness.

4. God is one whose free, active faithful being initiates dialogue. The content involved in the knowledge of God given in revelation is not, according to Niebuhr, such that one gazes in contemplation upon God in isolation, in his aseity.

¹Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, p. 125.

²Ibid., p. 143.

³Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 151.

Niebuhr insisted that the knowledge of God as a person is the result of a genuine dialogue involving the initial movement of God toward man as an invitation to respond freely and consciously as one self to another self. For Christians the possibility of entering into the dialogue with God involves "the concrete meeting with other men" who have so entered and "the concrete meeting with Jesus Christ."¹ The knowledge of God is knowledge that involves the concrete relation of God, self and neighbor.

The God who makes himself known and whom the Church seeks to know is no isolated God. If the attribute of aseity, i.e., being by and for itself is applicable to him at all it is not applicable to him as known by the Church. What is known and knowable in theology is God in relation to self and neighbor, and self and neighbor in relation to God. This complex of related beings is the object of theology.²

To know God as a person, according to Niebuhr, is to know him as one who has initiated concrete relationship with others and with oneself. Theology, he maintained, is properly conducted by those who actively participate in the response of trust and loyalty, that is, in faith, which has before it the ultimate environment calling upon selves to decide freely to be loyal to its cause.³

¹Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God," p. 124..

²Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, pp. 112-113.

³Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, p. 47.

Niebuhr pointed out that the word "revelation" is used in speaking about the manner, in which God is known because it is a fitting expression for the knowledge of a person.¹ Knowledge of persons begins with the initiative of the other but cannot be properly knowledge of the other until it is responded to.² While we cannot truly come to know another person unless the latter initiates action with the intention of revealing himself, neither is it possible to know that person unless we genuinely respond to that action. Revelation is the initiation of dialogue and as such it is the revelation of a person. Niebuhr's approach to the principle invoked by Luther, that God and faith hold close together, was to focus on the essential dialogical dimension of the divine and the human as a dynamic inter-personal relationship. The divine is present as a reality inviting response and the character of the invitation is such that the appropriate response is the "reliance of a person on a person."³ When the divine is thus present and responded to, the life of

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 143. Niebuhr cites Buber's book, I and Thou, as a source of insight into the special character or knowledge of person. See also The Responsible Self, pp. 72f, where Niebuhr sees Mead and Buber, though having "very different general orientations," having reached similar conclusions.

²Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 143f.

³Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God," p. 125.

the human self becomes involved in a continuous and radical revolution of mind and heart. When the human self has been invited to trust and loyalty in its relation with the principle and source of all being all particular beings are then regarded with reverence and love.¹

The initiation of dialogue by God plunges man into a world of ever-new possibilities, infinite expansion and intensification of the activities of mind and heart, or, in other words, the continuous development of his total selfhood which has discovered its meaning and value in terms of the invitation to respond to the faithful, ever-present One who confronts the self in the manyness that constitutes its world. The human self becomes itself in an ongoing dialogue with the world which has now become for it the embodiment of the Infinite and Eternal Other. For Niebuhr, then, the concept of God as a person involved, as a basic element, the component of dialogue.

Niebuhr's references to God pointed consistently to the four components set forth in the preceding pages. It is our position that these constituted for him the theological concept of God as a person. Reasoning in faith meant, for Niebuhr, that activity of the intellect abstracting, comparing, and conceptualizing, which proceeds from and returns to the

¹Ibid., pp. 125-126.

concrete reality of being confronted by God, of experiencing God in relation to self and neighbor, and self and neighbor in relation to God.¹ Thus, what is present to reason when it performs its proper function are the "forms, patterns, ideas ingredient in the Thous."² The concrete experience upon which reason works, however, is the complex relation of God, self and neighbor. Because for Niebuhr the knowledge of self and neighbor is intimately connected with knowledge of God, he did not see how they could be separated. In the following section we will examine Niebuhr's thought on man as a person and see, finally, how, in the context of faith, the concepts of God and man as persons are related.

¹Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, pp. 112f.

²Ibid., p. 130.

B. The Concept of Man as a Person. Niebuhr acknowledged that the conviction that God is a person runs the risk of creating anthropomorphic images of God.¹ The awareness of existing as a person, or a self (Niebuhr used the two terms interchangeably), was in Niebuhr's view a primary cognition of man. There is, then, the danger of thinking and speaking about God as a person with concepts and language that arise from human self-consciousness. But he insisted that theology could only think and speak of God as he is known in the concreteness of the relation of his self-revealing action towards man and the latter's response in faith.² If revelation is the revelation of a self, the emergence of a person, the point at which men begin to think and act in an intelligent and intelligible world of persons, and if faith is the acknowledgement of a "Thou," an act of reliance of a person on a person, the development of integrated selfhood, then one of the tasks of theology, according to Niebuhr, is to develop human understanding of what it means to exist as a person in the presence of God who reveals himself as a person.³

¹Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, pp. 44-45.

²Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, pp. 112-113; also Radical Monotheism, pp. 12-16.

³Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 87, 94, 154, and Radical Monotheism, pp. 47f, 122f.

The fact that we proceed to reason about our existence as persons before the person of God is not a matter of choice; "we reason because we must."¹ Reason permeates faith.² Reflection precedes, accompanies, and follows our actions, it is a necessary ingredient in all activity.³ Theology is that reasoning which follows upon the activity of faith. As reasoning, it involves abstraction, comparison, conceptualization; it notes relations and forms ideas of them.⁴ As faith-reasoning, it attends to the experience of God's own self revelation and man's response. The development and critique of such reasoning has as its departure point the event in which God is acknowledged by man as "Thou." But the acknowledgement of God as a "Thou" presupposes that man has some previous experience and understanding of a reality, or realities, that exist as "Thous."

As the following paragraphs will show, Niebuhr was convinced that man naturally comes to conceive of himself as one who exists in a context of dynamic interrelation with other beings wherein the awareness of certain of the related beings includes knowledge of selfhood expressed

¹Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, p. 250.

²Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, p. 15.

³Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, p. 128.

⁴Ibid., p. 129. Niebuhr insisted that the theoretical activity involved in theological reflection "cannot stand alone" and must be "set within the larger personal and social context of a life of love of God and neighbor."

by such symbols as "I" and "Thou." He admitted that the uniqueness of the subject referred to by personal pronouns posed a problem for humankind when it tries "to think and speak intelligibly and rationally, from mind to mind," when, in trying to unify its experiences and thoughts about them, it seeks to find "recurrent patterns of behavior or enduring structures or permanent relations or abstract universals."¹ But, Niebuhr insisted, we cannot escape this fundamental awareness of existing as persons, as selves, and therefore it must enter into our reflections on the meaning of our existence. Whatever understanding we arrive at through our natural situation of being selves in relation to other selves it must be brought to bear on that experience in which the principle and source of existence reveals itself as, like ourselves, an "I" and elicits from us the confession, "Thou art my God." That natural reasoning which precedes, accompanies and follows our actions also exercises its powers of development and critique upon the activity of faith. It follows, then, if faith is understood, as it was by Niebuhr, as reliance of a person on a person, theology, which is reasoning in faith, is ultimately concerned with the meaning of existence-as-person.

The question arises, therefore, as to the relation between man's natural knowledge of himself as a person,

¹Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, p. 45.

prior to revelation, and the knowledge of person as it is given in God's own self-revelation.¹ Niebuhr indicated that he understood man's awareness of being a self as a primary cognition.

Yet there is something in our human existence, in our world, with our companions and in ourselves that cannot be denied yet cannot be understood with the aid of impersonal categories. All our experiencing and experimenting, our thinking and communicating goes on within a complex interaction of irreducible "I's" and "You's."²

My self-existence is not deduced from something that is more evidently the case than that I am. There is no way of moving from the impersonal statements that thinking is going on, or that living is in process, or that feeling occurs, to the conclusion that therefore I am. Only if I posit the self can I refer this thinking, living, feeling, to myself.³

Niebuhr referred to this self-conscious existence of man as a fateful fact, the origin, meaning and destiny of which are among the most obscure matters to which men address themselves.⁴ In the history of their quest for understanding their existence as selves men have taken note

¹This question is implicit in Niebuhr's reflections on divine and human selfhood and parallels the approach explicitly taken by him in discussing the relation of natural knowledge of deity to the knowledge of God given in revelation. Cf. The Meaning of Revelation, Chapter 4, especially pp. 175-177.

²Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, p. 45.

³Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, pp. 109-110.

⁴Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 91.

of certain constant characteristics and among these, Niebuhr observed, were the elements of agency, of existence as social and as historical, or time-full, and as radically dependent.¹

The human self is conscious of being a subject that exists as an agent, one in charge of its acts, one who thinks, feels, judges and otherwise acts in response to actions upon it. Niebuhr considered a fundamental element in human self-awareness to be that all of life has the character of responsiveness. Thus, the self as agent is a responsible self. His proposal of "response" or "responsibility" as a useful symbol for seeking understanding and expression of existence as a self was based on the principle that such existence is basically interactional, that the self exists as one who acts in response to actions upon it.² The self, in other words, is a social self.

This awareness of the self as a responsible agent includes that of other active beings that think, feel, judge and otherwise participate in responsive existence. "To be a self in the presence of other selves is not a

¹Niebuhr's Robertson lectures, posthumously published as The Responsible Self, is a reflection on the moral existence of man. His understanding of the content of human self-knowledge is most clearly set forth in this work.

²Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, pp. 46, 47-68.

derivative experience but primordial."¹ Thus, Niebuhr understood that the human self's ability to say "I am I" is not an inference from the statement that it thinks thoughts or is conscious of laws but is, rather, the acknowledgement of its existence as a counterpart of other selves.² He regarded this existence of self in relation to other selves as a radically dialogical existence in which knowledge of the world of nature and decisions as to what makes the life of the self worthwhile involve the interpretations and decisions of the self's social companion, and a third, i.e., a natural event, or a cause.³ The involvement of the social companion in the self's relation to nature and in its valuational activity suggests that existence as a self is one in which there is always an interaction of trust between selves. The life of the self in dialogue is one that involves coming to knowledge and bringing to expression the self's relation to nature on the basis of interpersonal trust between the self and its companions with reference to a third, an "it." It is

¹Ibid., p. 71.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., pp. 79-84; Cfr. also "The Triad of Faith," in Andover Newton Bulletin, XLVII (1954), pp. 3-12. Niebuhr shows the influence of George Herbert Mead and Martin Buber in his interpretation of the self's existence in dialogue but the initial idea of dialogue as involving three parties is attributed to Josiah Royce. See The Responsible Self, p. 83.

also a life in which the knowledge and expression of what is worthwhile about such a life includes the valuation of the social companion regarding the worthy, the cause, or that upon which he relies for meaning.¹ Thus Niebuhr saw the human self as a subject engaged in responding to other selves in a complex interaction of trust and loyalty with reference to a third which represents a value that gives meaning and binds selves together in community.

A third element in the self's awareness, according to Niebuhr, is that of time. Not only is the world of other, whether it be the social companion or natural events, present to the self in the existing moment, in the "now," but it is also present to the self as a world of beings that have been and are expected to be encountered in the future. This awareness of the threefoldness of time, i.e., past, present, and future, is also one that the self is conscious of as regards its own existence. Its own identity, according to Niebuhr, includes the awareness of having been, being now, and going into existence and encounter.² As an active being engaged in dialogue, the self is conscious of having inherited patterns of action from the past and predictions of the future and his existence

¹Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, pp. 82-89; see also Radical Monotheism, pp. 22-23.

²Ibid., p. 93.

as a self appears to have a quality of fatedness about it.¹ But in each present moment the self is capable of dealing with his time-fullness as a free individual. Self-awareness in time, in other words, includes the possibility of changing the inherited patterns. Niebuhr saw two possibilities in this respect. The self can put aside older interpretations and begin afresh or it can restudy the past and rethink the future and discover aspects that were ignored or overlooked and in so doing revise and expand its history.² The self's time-full self-awareness suggests the element of freedom in its existence, at least insofar as it exists in relation to nature and to other selves. It can act independently and creatively as it probes further into the mysteries of nature and as it reinterprets the actions of other selves and its own self not only with respect to what has been done in the past and is being done in the present but also what is being planned for in the future.³

Finally, the self as active in society and in time is, according to Niebuhr, also aware of its being a radically dependent subject. The self knows that its unique existence is the result of an action outside of itself and outside of all finite actions that constitute its physical, mental and

¹Ibid., p. 98f, 172f.

²Ibid., pp. 100f. Forgetting the past and making a fresh beginning has, according to Niebuhr, aided man's conquest of nature but has been unsuccessful as an approach to understanding of interpersonal life. The method of reinterpretation has been far more productive with respect to understanding our history as social persons.

³Ibid., pp. 105-106.

personal existence.¹ The attitude of the self toward the radical action by which it is flung into existence in its here-and-now-ness, thus-and-so-ness, is ultimately one of trust or distrust. "Our primordial interpretation of the radical action by which we are is made in faith as trust or distrust."² The self exists, therefore, as a faithful being in the sense that all of its active existence as regards nature, social companion, and time is qualified by the fundamental disposition it holds toward the ultimate power by which it is brought into its unique existence and held there.³ Niebuhr suggested that this reference to the ultimate context is also present in our reflections on the social and historical dimensions of the self, that the question regarding the ultimate society and the ultimate history of the self is at least implicitly present in the self's awareness and the search for understanding that arises from it.⁴ Thus Niebuhr saw the self as coming to understand its own existence as an active subject exercising freedom in time and adopting an attitude of faith toward the world of other with which it is in dialogue, and all this as including an ultimate reference. To the natural

¹Ibid., p. 112.

²Ibid., p. 119.

³Ibid., pp. 115, 119f.

⁴Ibid., pp. 86-89, 106-107, 109.

mind, Niebuhr observed, this ultimate context or environment appears as an enemy to the self which, in all its actions, its timefulness, and its dialogue in community, seems to come to nothing.¹ It is this aspect of self-awareness and self-understanding that Niebuhr saw transformed by God's self-revelation. The awareness of the ultimate as a void or an enemy was converted to awareness of it as a friend and companion.² The manifestation of God as a self involves the transformation of human understanding of existence as an active, free, faithful dialogue; it involves the knowledge that such existence is in reality the gift of participation in the infinite and eternal unity of divine life, that it is, in a real and concrete sense, existence in relation to God.³

Thus, for Niebuhr, God's self-revelation not only transforms man's understanding of deity but also man's own self-understanding as he comes to realize his internal oneness as a self is grounded in the oneness of God's own selfhood.⁴ The agency, freedom, faithfulness and dialogue

¹Ibid., pp. 140-141; see also Radical Monotheism, pp. 119-122.

²Ibid., pp. 136f, especially p. 143; also Radical Monotheism, pp. 44f, 119f, 122-124.

³Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, pp. 11-29. Niebuhr maintained that the personhood of Jesus Christ analyzed from the perspective of his moral action is essentially intelligible only as relation to God. Faith elicited by recognition of the meaning of personal existence as demonstrated by Jesus involves the human self in the dynamic double movement which consists in God relating to man and man relating to God. (p. 29)

⁴Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, pp. 136f. Hoedemaker points out that the larger unity, i.e., of the community of selves in the church, and its unity with all men in the world, was, for Niebuhr, to be sought solely in terms of the unity of God. See Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 146-147.

that constitute human existence as self are met by the agency, freedom, faithfulness and dialogue of the divine self. Existence in relation to God is seen to be radically personal existence and the components that are present in the understanding that arises from the concretely experienced relation initiated by God are present to human consciousness as dynamic, transforming elements in the conception of existence as self. The implicit invitation to dialogue with the ultimate companion in social existence is made explicit and the human self comes to learn that the ultimate achievement in dialogue involves the continuation of encounter until all of nature, all causes, and every neighbor is included.¹ God's steadfast loyalty is seen to be present in every event and every event is seen to be the action of the faithful, divine self.² The eternal freedom of God is seen to be the ultimate context of the existence of the self in time.³ To exist as a self in relation to God is to be caught up in eternal and infinite activity, freedom, faithfulness and dialogue, or, simply, to be a self ever becoming a self in the presence of the divine self. To think and speak in the presence of God who reveals himself as person is to have all thought and speech about personal

¹Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, pp. 88.

²Ibid., pp. 121, 123, 125, 143; also Radical Monotheism, pp. 44, 47, and Niebuhr's articles on war. (See above p. 104.)

³Ibid., p. 107; also Christ and Culture, pp. 249f; The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 135, 152, 174f.

existence subject to permanent correction.¹ The very life of the self is lived "in the midst of a great revolution."² This dynamic aspect of personal existence appeared to Niebuhr as the essential meaning of revelation.³ The emergence of consciousness of God as a person was in his view the central fact of Christian faith. Reflection on that fact had the twofold effect of transforming all thought and speech about God as well as man. The divine and the human are seen together as selves in concrete relation as free, active, faithful beings in dialogue--the former in his absoluteness and the latter in his relativity. In the history of the Christian self the meaning of existence as self is given in the event of Jesus Christ whereby his own personhood was the revelation of the relation between the absolute and the relative, between God and man, as a dynamic movement of self to self. This event in history has given rise to faith, that is, the reliance of the human person on the divine person. It is the occasion for learning that the meaning of existence as self is to be found in the demonstration of the faithfulness of the Father

¹Ibid., p. 125; also The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 1546f, 175f.

²Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 183; also The Responsible Self, pp. 1431.

³Ibid., p. 191.

and the faithfulness of the Son, freely, actively engaged in dialogue. Thus Niebuhr regarded the response to this demonstration as the development of integrated selfhood.¹ Tendencies toward anthropomorphism are checked by virtue of the revolutionary effects of God's self-revealing action, since the life of the divine person who makes himself present to man demands from the latter total integration of life as action, as freedom, as fidelity and dialogue. To come to the knowledge of God as a person is only the beginning of knowledge, for until every act, all time, total trust and loyalty, all of nature and every companion, are constituents of the self's existence it remains incomplete.

Summary

While Niebuhr's writings show that he seemed to regard the four components which have been set forth in the preceding discussion as the fundamental elements contained in the idea of personhood, divine and human, their dynamic character suggests to his readers that it is precisely because theology is reflection on the personal dimension of divine and human existence that it cannot genuinely do its work unless it resists defensiveness; absolutizing the relative, and the petrification of thought and speech. The inherent character of the four elements which appear to underlie Niebuhr's reflections on the complex object of theology, namely, God, self and neighbor in their interrelations,

¹Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, p. 47. See also The Responsible Self, pp. 139, 143f, 175f.

suggests that while constant factors are involved in all thinking and speaking of God in relation to man and man in relation to God they never become objects of defense themselves, rational absolutes, or settled facts. Each element is dynamically interrelated to the other and their presence in our thinking and speaking arises from concrete encounter with one in whose presence they are apprehended as a unity. Presupposed in every reference to each is the absolute, dynamic oneness to which we refer in the confession "Thou art my God."

With respect to the danger of anthropomorphic reductionism in thinking and speaking of God it appears that Niebuhr understood the problem to be resolved by the inherent dynamism of the encounter with God. While the human self, at the moment of being confronted by the divine self, carries within itself "a small seed of integrity, a haunting sense of unity," it is unable to discover anything in its world which would "make that internal unity actual."¹ In search of a reality which gives meaning and value to its existence the self, according to Niebuhr, may turn to itself, to other, human selves, to institutions, ideologies, and many other causes, only to discover their inadequacy in supplying continuous meaning and value.² In this situation the human

¹Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, p. 139.

²Niebuhr, "Faith in God and in Gods," pp. 119-122.

self becomes aware of its existence as if surrounded by a great void, an enemy of all its causes, an opponent of all its gods. Such is the enviroing reality that Niebuhr understood to have become the object of devotion in the lives of many. Among Christians, as one stream in human history where such faith has occurred, it has involved "the concrete meeting of other men who have received this faith, and the concrete meeting with Jesus Christ."¹ This event is the manifestation of what had seemed a great void or a hostile force as one to be counted upon as a friend and whose self-presentation was the occasion of initiating a life of faith (reliance of a person on a person) which involves the self in a continuous intellectual and moral revolution. For Niebuhr it seemed clearly the case that this event in human history, whenever and wherever it occurs, involves experience of a reality the conceptualization of which includes the components recognized by a natural reason as the content of the concept of personhood.² But it is equally clear that he viewed the concept of personhood which arises in human interaction to be transformed by the concept which arises in divine-human interaction. This transformation does not involve the introduction of additional components but rather

¹Ibid., p. 124.

²Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, pp. 44f.

their dynamic development in an ongoing process of coming to see the ultimate unity responsible for the small seed of integrity, the haunting sense of unity, which the human self was unable to actualize before its encounter with the person of God.

The following section will involve an elaboration of the relation between the components of Niebuhr's concept of personhood presented above and the question of the integration of personal existence.

C. Integration of Personal Existence. The problem of the unity of existence was a constant concern in Niebuhr's thought. He sought in various ways to formulate what he understood to be the causes of disunity and conflict within Christianity, between it and the larger world in which it lives, and among men of all times and places. That there is an ultimate, unifying force at work in the world is a common conviction in the minds and hearts of men, according to Niebuhr.

That one power is present in all the powers to which we are subject is a presupposition of our lives which we may question intellectually but do not really question in our action. We entertain pluralistic hypotheses about the world in various metaphysical speculations yet we continue to seek to know as those who have a universal intent. We seek a knowledge that will be universally true, though all our propositions are known to be only approximations to universal truth. We have the unconquerable conviction that we confront a oneness behind and in and through all the many-ness in which we live and which we know.¹

It is an essential part of human existence to have for itself an object which gives meaning and value to such existence, and that which men accept as giving ultimate meaning to their lives and making them ultimately worthwhile is their god.² "To be a self is to have a God," according to Niebuhr,

¹Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, p. 175.

²Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God," pp. 118-119.

and it is characteristic of most of the history of human faith and its Gods that permanency and unity of meaning and value have not been achieved.¹ The problem of the ultimate unity of existence is the problem of finding a central meaning and value that is universal and can save men from the final frustration of passing into darkness and worthlessness. All objects that fall within the realm of human experience are subject to decay and death. This passing away is also part of our subjective experience. All life as we know it, then, seems doomed. The ultimate environment out of which things come into being and to which they return appears, to our natural reason at least, as a void or an enemy. This nature of things, this fate, this supreme reality by virtue of which things exist and cease to exist, is the enemy of all our causes or objects of trust and loyalty, the opponent of all our gods.² There seem, in the final analysis, to be only two possibilities for us as regards our fundamental attitude toward the cause of our being and all other beings.

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 80-81, and "Faith in Gods and in God," pp. 120. See also Radical Monotheism, p. 31f, where Niebuhr observed that genuine radical faith in the "one beyond all the many, whence all the many derive their being," and in whom ultimate meaning and value rests is, perhaps, more a hope than a datum and yet is an actuality that has emerged at certain times to modify natural faith and polytheism.

²Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God," p. 122.

Our primordial interpretation of the radical action by which we are is made in faith as trust or distrust. Between these two there seems to be no middle term.¹

The attitude taken toward the ultimate source of existence qualifies our interpretation of and response to all existences that surround us.² If, however, the attitude is one of distrust, if the ultimate remains a meaningless void or a destructive power, then we tend to seek meaning and value among the many, finite beings. But if it should happen that the ultimate elicits our trust and confidence in it, then whatever is, is good, and all of life has a center, a focal point, toward which all knowing and valuing is pointed. The individual self, its immediate exclusive social world and natural environment, and the larger, inclusive world of Thou's and It' are meaningful and worthwhile because the ultimate One beyond the many,

this power present in all powers, this reason present in all reasons, this idea inclusive of all ideas, this nature behind and through all natures, this environment environing all our environments, is beneficent towards what proceeds from it, or to what it encloses.³

This integration of existence is the character of what

¹Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, p. 119.

²Ibid., p. 121f.

³Ibid., p. 175.

Niebuhr called radical monotheistic faith.¹ His theology is often viewed as a consistent development of radical monotheism.² It follows from his own explication of the meaning of that term that theology was considered by him as part of the integrative process begun by faith.

Radical faith is the confidence that whatever is, is good, because it exists as one thing among the many which all have their origin and their being in the One--the principle of being which is also the principle of value.³

Radical faith is the development of integrated selfhood. Theology is the development of reason that permeates such faith. Therefore, theology involves the integration of the reasoning self and is part of the total process by which man becomes what he discovers himself to be, namely, a person in relation to God. The revelation of God makes existence as a person meaningful and worthwhile because the revelation of God is the revelation of a person.

As the preceding presentation of the components in Niebuhr's concept of God indicated, it was Niebuhr's

¹Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, pp. 32f, 47f; also "The Center of Value," pp. 112-113; "Faith in Gods and in God," pp. 121-122; The Responsible Self, p. 86f. The term "radical monotheism" first appears in Niebuhr's article, "War As the Judgment of God," in Christian Century, LIX (1942), p. 630-633.

²See Frei, op. cit., p. 10; Hoedemaker, op. cit., p. 45; Joseph Allen, "A Decisive Influence on Protestant Ethics," in Christianity and Crisis, XXIII, 20 (November 25, 1963), p. 217; Paul Ramsey, Faith and Ethics, p. x.

³Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, p. 32.

understanding that the self-revelation of God as a person was the very cornerstone of radical monotheistic confidence and loyalty. It is the emergence of God as a person that transforms faith as distrust into faith as trust in man's ultimate environment. Such faith not only transforms human thought and speech about God but also thinking and speaking about man as a being in relation to God. The reasoning that accompanies such faith reflects upon this transformation in terms of the transforming object and the transformed subject. In other words, for Niebuhr faith-reasoning meant reflection on the relation of God to man and man to God. Not only does reason reflect upon the relation and its objective and subjective terms but it also reflects upon its own operations which are now seen to be transformed. As for practical reasoning, it is illuminated by the presence of a reality that makes intelligible its role in deciding how to act in response to actions in a world of persons.¹ Niebuhr also indicated that reason, in what he thought of as its speculative or impersonal form of activity, is guided by the integrative force of faith.² The thrust of his thought from The Meaning of Revelation on seemed to be in the direction

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 94; also Radical Monotheism, p. 47. The Responsible Self, passim.

²Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 87-90.

of demonstrating the unity of thought in a theology which begins with the integration of selfhood through faith in the ultimate unity as one whose integrity is that of a self.

It has been suggested that those writings which reflected Niebuhr's thoughts on God and man show certain constants or components that constituted, at least implicitly, his concept of personhood. It was further suggested that the very nature of those constants reflect both the integration involved in the relation established by God's self-disclosure and the dynamic character of that integration. Finally, it seems to follow that if the dynamic and unifying inter-activity between God and man, which Niebuhr regarded as the proper object of theology, is reflected upon in terms of those constants then the past failures of theology may be more easily avoided, especially the tendencies to defensiveness, absolutizing the relative, and a static interpretation of the relation between God and man.¹ Reasoning in faith, according to Niebuhr, is to reflect on "the presence of one faithful person in the multiplicity of events that happen to the self."² Thus, while such reasoning is ever-focused on one reality, is unified insofar as it has as its proper object the oneness of a self who is the oneness behind everything, it is a reasoning that recognizes its object in terms of dynamic conceptual elements. Such faith-reflection

¹Ibid., pp. viii, 41-42.

²Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, p. 47.

involves the development and critique of reason which precedes, accompanies, and follows the response to a concrete event in history wherein the object that presents itself is such that reason takes note of it in terms of the four constants indicated above. Reason recognizes the object of faith as a person because it has learned to identify act, freedom, faithfulness and dialogue as the conceptual content involved in experience with human selves. The difference between radical faith and the natural faith that characterizes human interpersonal encounters is that the former involves the total integration of the self. Thus Niebuhr wrote

In this our personal and social manifoldness we have been left with a small seed of integrity, a haunting sense of unity and of universal responsibility. But there seems to be nothing in the world of forces acting upon us which makes that internal unity actual. There seems to be no one among all the many corresponding to that hidden self which is not free to act integrally amidst the many systems to which it responds.¹

The effect of the revelation of God as a person in Jesus is such that

The responsible self we see in Christ and which we believe is being elicited in all our

¹Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, p. 139.

race is a universally and eternally responsive I, answering in universal society and in time without end, in all actions upon it, to the action of the One who heals all our diseases, forgives all our iniquities, saves our lives from destruction, and crowns us with everlasting mercy...It is action which is fitted into the context of universal, eternal, life-giving action by the One.¹

The problem of the unity of existence arises for man in the awareness of being a unique subject-self whose existence as such is dependent upon a radical action outside of the many actions contributing to its mental, physical, emotional and personal existence. The thus-and-so-ness of the self is dependent in a radical sense upon a source of unity, a Oneness behind everything.²

As mentioned earlier, Niebuhr considered that the fundamental attitude of the self toward that ultimate unifying power responsible for the uniqueness of the self is either one of trust or distrust. If the ultimate is not trustworthy then the unity of the self has no meaning, it is doomed for final destruction. If the ultimate is trustworthy then the unity of the self is meaningful and worthwhile. The occasion of coming to trust in the ultimate, that is, the radical action by which "I am I," is, according to Niebuhr, an event in which the ultimate emerges as an "I" in our history. The self and all existences surrounding it are then seen to be beings that participate in a universe that is an integrated,

¹Ibid., p. 144.

²Ibid., p. 175.

meaningful and worthwhile whole. Thus the interpretation of and response to existence are made in the context of a rational and moral unity.¹ Existence becomes an intelligible and valuable unity held together by the principle of being and value whose very own existence is revealed as that of a truthful, faithful being. That such integration of personal existence took place as the result of an historical event had, in Niebuhr's view, profound implications for theology in our day.²

Few aspects of the theologian's work concerned Niebuhr more than the need for adjusting the formulation of the Christian understanding of the unity of existence to the modern awareness of historical relativity.³ In his view,

¹Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, p. 255, and The Meaning of Revelation, p. 94; also, Radical Monotheism, pp. 47-48.

²Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 1-38.

³For an extensive and informative treatment of the modern rise of historical consciousness and the particular lines of thought which seem to have been the primary context in which Niebuhr's reflections on history took place, see William R. Murry's "Faith and History in the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr," Doctoral Dissertation, Drew University, 1970. (Available on University Microfilm, Ann Arbor, Michigan.) While Murry emphasizes the European thinkers from Vico through the Romantics and Hegel up to Troeltsch there is also strong evidence of Niebuhr's attention to the thoughts of American historians such as Charles Beard and Carl Becker. See Niebuhr, The Social Sources of Denominationalism, pp. 164, 188-189, 290, 292; The Kingdom of God in America, p. 210; Niebuhr's review of Becker's The Heavenly City of Eighteenth Century Philosophers in Yale Divinity News, XXIX, 2, 5. Our concern will be limited to a discussion of the specifically theological approach Niebuhr took towards the problem of historical relativity and the role of the concept of divine personhood in it.

the conviction that all knowledge was conditioned by the standpoint of the knower, a conviction that had impressed itself upon both the natural and human sciences, had to be incorporated into the theological expression of what becomes known in revelation, "Meaning by that word simply historic faith."¹ How can one speak of existence as a rational and moral unity when the very occasion in which that unity is realized is, at the same time, acknowledged as both subjectively and objectively conditioned? Recognition of the radical historicity of human existence would seem not only to bar any attempt at transmitting the meaning of history as a totality but also to destroy all hope of even discovering such meaning. It was, therefore, Niebuhr's main purpose in The Meaning of Revelation to show how Christians must address themselves to this problem in the light of their experience. It is important at this point to emphasize the specifically theological character of Niebuhr's approach. This is aptly brought forward by Hoedemaker's statement that

we must again remind ourselves that Niebuhr treats the problem of history as the problem of revelation and, more particularly, that his reasoning about history begins on the basis of the given revelation in Jesus Christ. He does not begin with a general

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 22. Besides the historical relativity to be recognized by theology Niebuhr also emphasized the need for recognition of "religious relativity" meaning by this that "one can think and speak significantly about God only from the point of view of faith in him." For the Christian theologian faith is always a particular faith, i.e., the faith of the Christian community directed towards the God of Jesus Christ. (Ibid., pp. 23, 37.)

or neutral concept of history, and he does not inquire into the possibility of revelation on the basis of such a concept. He begins with the presence of a Christian community and a Christian witness, and proceeds to analyze how this witness looks at history and is present in history.¹

Only after he noted that the early Christian community transmitted its understanding of itself primarily by a telling of its own story, "a simple recital of the great events connected with the historical appearance of Jesus Christ and a confession of what happened to the community of disciples," did Niebuhr make his distinction between "history as lived" (internal history) and "history as seen" (external history).² This two-aspect theory of history was intended as an illustration of what was essentially not an arbitrary matter. It was out of an internal compulsion, the inability to do otherwise, because the situation permitted no other method, that Christians have communicated what they have come to know primarily in terms of personal, internal history rather than impersonal external history.³ What was,

¹Hoedemaker, op. cit., p. 98. (Emphasis ours.)

²Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 59f.

³As he then proceeded to develop a two-aspect theory of history Niebuhr insisted that a historical reality was one reality but able to be seen in different aspects from distinctive standpoints. The point was that if the distinction of perspectives is allowed then it may be possible to understand how revelation can mean history and God, multiplicity and unity, relativity and absoluteness.

of course, crucial to Niebuhr's thought was the recognition of the relativity of the internal aspect as well as the external and, at the same time, of the special character of meaning connected with the former.¹ He gave some illustrations in support of this view by pointing to the differences between a scientific case history and an autobiographical account of a blind man who comes to see, and between Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and the Cambridge Modern History version of the same event, of which Lincoln spoke. In regard to these illustrations and the Christian perspective, in contrast to non-Christian perspectives Niebuhr wrote:

The distinction between the two types of history cannot be made by applying to value judgment of true and false but must be made by reference to differences of perspectives... Events may be regarded from the outside by a non-participating observer; then they belong to the history of things. They may be apprehended from within, as items in the destiny of persons and communities; then they belong to a life-time and must be interpreted in a context of persons with their resolutions and devotions.²

¹Niebuhr did not reduce all "meaning" in history to internal history. The unified aspect of existence given in internal history regards existence as personal, as the existence of selves, and it is the task of such as have received this meaning to bring it into relation with the impersonal, objective, external aspects which reason, in its speculative mode apprehends.

²Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 63.

Thus Niebuhr expressed his conviction that the same historical reality could be seen in different aspects from distinctive standpoints. He clearly "located," as it were, faith-reasoning in internal history and, moreover, insisted that to live as a self having reference to an object of devotion, to some center of value, to something that makes life worth living, is an inescapable part of human existence.¹ In other words, no man lives without faith and as a historical being, therefore, has an inner history in which an event or events is (are) regarded as meaningful in terms of his personal destiny. Niebuhr then concluded that

The standpoint of faith, of a self directed toward gods or God, and the standpoint of practical reason, of a self with values and with a destiny, are not incompatible; they are probably identical. To be a self is to have a god; to have a god is to have history, that is, events connected in a meaningful pattern; to have one god is to have one history. God and the history of selves in community belong together in inseparable union.²

While his presentation up to that point indicated the basis for his distinction between internal and external history, and the subsequent chapters in The Meaning of Revelation were attempts to clarify the nature of historical reasoning from the practical, i.e., faith, standpoint and

¹Ibid., p. 80.

²Ibid., p. 80.

the intrinsic character of the central image or concept of such reasoning on the basis of the Christian experience, the relationship between internal history and external history was a crucial question considered by Niebuhr midway through this work.¹

The two-aspect theory of history, according to Niebuhr, serves to point out the problem of unity in duality and duality in unity in which Christian life and history is forever involved. Recognition that all knowing is conditioned by the point of view, that there are two fundamental viewpoints in human reasoning, the practical, personal and the speculative, impersonal, that one historical reality, therefore, yields different experiences and conceptualizations, brings forward the dilemma of human existence and restatement of it in a new paradoxical form.² In other words, the two-aspect theory of history, as proposed by Niebuhr, does not dissolve the dilemma or escape paradoxical expression of it, but it may be a way of stating it more clearly and enabling us to

see why we can speak of revelation only in connection with our own history without affirming or denying its reality in the history of other communities into whose inner life we cannot penetrate without abandoning ourselves and our community.³

¹Ibid., pp. 81-90. That the external perspective was an important function for theologians to exercise was born out in Niebuhr's own career, as is clear from his Social Sources of Denominationalism, Christ and Culture, and The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry, pp. 120-123.

²Ibid., pp. 81-82.

³Ibid., p. 82.

In Niebuhr's view there did not exist the possibility of escaping two-world thinking in a higher perspective where both internal and external aspects of events can be seen as one. This, he insisted, would be events as they are for God.¹ Though we cannot, as finite minds in finite bodies, gain a metaphysical or meta-historical perspective we can describe the relationship between the two aspects in other terms, that is, how the external aspects function practically in relation to the internal aspects.

Such a description must once again be given confessionally, not as a statement of what all men ought to do but as a statement of what we have found is necessary to do in the Christian community on the basis of the faith which is our starting point.²

In so describing the way external history functions for internal history Niebuhr attached three meanings to the former.³ The first, and what appeared to be the primary one for Niebuhr, was disinterested or scientific history which involved seeking knowledge of what happened and abstracting as much as possible from personal values and commitments. The second meaning referred to the viewpoints of non-Christians

¹Ibid., p. 84.

²Ibid., p. 84.

³Ibid., pp. 84-90. As one commentator has pointed out, this part of Niebuhr's reflections on history suggests a lack of precision and clarification, but does not represent a substantial problem since the three meanings, in effect, amount to one idea, namely, that external history was that aspect or perspective of events other than that of the Christian's internal history. See W. R. Murry, op. cit., p. 202.

on events, or, simply, all alien internal histories. (This would involve, for example, "how others see us.") The third meaning pointed to the external "embodiment" or objective actuality through which internal aspects make themselves known. As the preceding footnote indicated, Niebuhr's treatment failed to go into much detail as to how these three meanings related to each other, and even their respective relations to internal history were rather sketchy in their presentation. But the major points he intended to make were clear enough, namely, that external history shared validity with internal history on the basis of recognition of the relativity of human thought and it was important in terms of the practical functional relationship it had with internal history. Of this importance Niebuhr indicated three things.

- 1) Since internal history involves the idea that God is acting in all events, the external aspect of history becomes the realm of inquiry where the Christian seeks to find further evidence of how what was made known in his own particular history is being manifested in other histories.
- 2) Alien internal histories can act as critical perspectives preventing Christians from exalting their internal history rather than the God of that inner life. "In this practical way external history has not been incompatible with inner life but directly contributory toward it."¹
- 3) Internal life does not exist without external embodiment, nor can we

¹Ibid.; p. 86.

point to it except it be embodied. External history in this sense is the medium in which internal history exists and comes to life. "Hence knowledge of its external history remains a duty of the church."¹

The relative validity and the importance of external history having been presented in that general way, Niebuhr's thoughts then turned to the task of determining in more precise fashion the area in which the meaning of revelation is apprehended by the Christian community, namely, its internal history.² In order to express the meaning of revelation the historic event to which Christians refer is Jesus Christ. It is in him that they find the rational pattern which illuminates their inner history, that is, their lives as selves seeking to understand their origin and destiny. As reason in its impersonal, speculative function relies on imagination to create images, concepts, patterns, that are appropriate references to sensations so also reason in its personal, practical function ("reasoning of the heart," as Niebuhr called it) seeks appropriate images referent to affections of the self. Niebuhr's discussion of the role of imagination

¹Ibid., p. 90.

²Our discussion of this material will aim at the main points only. Lengthier treatments have been provided by such commentators as Hoedemaker and Murry whose works have already been cited. The present writer is in general agreement with their analyses but considers his focus on the centrality of the concept of divine personhood an important supplement to their less pronounced emphasis on that aspect.

(and memory) in, both reasoning processes is aptly summed up by Lonnie Kliever as follows:

Both pure and practical reasoning work on brute data given in historical experience with the aid of imagination. The immediate data of pure reasoning are sensations of the body (visual and auditory, tactile and kinesthetic, etc.) while those of practical reasoning are "affections of the self" (joys and sorrows, loves and hates, fears and hopes, etc.)... Therefore, pure and practical reasoning differ primarily in the kinds of images, patterns or models appropriate to the kind of knowledge sought from a concrete standpoint. Pure reasoning deals with the entire physical, biological, psychological, sociological, and rational complex in which an event occurs... Its patterns are impersonal, effectual, and descriptive. Practical reasoning deals with the unities, values, meanings, and encounters in an event apprehended through faith. Its images are personal, valuational, and dramatic.¹

The life of the self requires, in Niebuhr's view, an appropriate rational basis, it has its own distinctive image as a referent to its personal history, and this, for the Christian, is the image which Jesus provides.

But in the final analysis it is not the recognition of the duality in our reasoning and its application to historical experience, nor is it a matter of freely choosing one event among many because it seems to make the most sense out of the

¹L. Kliever, "The Christology of H. Richard Niebuhr," in The Journal of Religion, Vol. 50, January 1970, pp. 35-36. On "memory" in Niebuhr's writings Kliever notes that no clear, systematic treatment was provided, but the basic idea is that the distinction is between time as "serial" and time as "durational," that is, as the enduring internal aspect of personal life. See Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 68-72, 110-131, and The Responsible Self, pp. 69-107.

rest, that expresses the meaning of revelation for Christians, according to Niebuhr.

...the rational value of revelation is not its first value and its validation in the reasoning of the heart is not the primary validation.¹

Its first value is intrinsic and its primary validation is its own self-evidencing quality.² Mindful of the limitations borne out in the entire discussion to this point Niebuhr proceeded to put forward what he understood to be the genuine expression of the meaning of revelation. While part of the following quotation has been used earlier (See "Introduction," p. 2), it bears repeating here in its larger context as we now move forward to our final consideration of the central role that the concept of divine personhood played in Niebuhr's thought on the Christian understanding of the unity of personal existence in time.

With these limitations in mind we turn to the central event with the question, "What is it that we are certain of as we regard the illuminating point in our history and how do we become certain of it?" We might state the question in terms of conceptual thought, asking, "What is the central idea in the invincible conviction that grows out of our memory of this event, or what the unassailable proposition that is communicated and that we intuit in the presence of the historic occasion?" But the idea and proposition are not the right terms to employ here. The most important fact about our whole approach to revelation to which we are committed

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 138-139.

²Ibid., pp. 139f.

by the acceptance of our existential situation, of the point of view of faith living in history, is that we must think and speak in terms of persons. In our history we deal with selves, not with concepts. Our universals here are not eternal objects ingredient in events but eternal persons active in particular occasions; our axioms in this participating knowledge are not self-evident convictions about the relations of such objects but certainties about fundamental, indestructible relations between persons. We need, therefore, to put our question in the following form, "What persons do we meet in the revelatory event and what convictions about personal relations become our established principles in its presence."¹

Niebuhr then pointed to the appropriateness of the term "revelation," for when the Christian community refers to that experience in the light of which it proceeds to seek an intelligible unity in all of life it refers to the presence of a person. Knowledge of persons is not a matter of discovery, not in the order of objective knowledge where the knower is the only active being, but rather it is a matter of first being known; knowledge of other persons begins with the activity of the other who knows us or reveals himself to us by his knowing activity.² "Selves are known in act or they are not known at all."³ The self that makes itself known in revelation is God.

¹Ibid., pp. 142-143.

²Ibid., p. 145.

³Ibid., p. 146.

Revelation means that moment in our history through which we know ourselves to be known from beginning to end, in which we are apprehended by the knower; it means the self-disclosing of that eternal knower.¹

What the Christian means by revelation, then, is not merely the experience of a self but of that self who in his knowing activity, that is, as the knower whose peculiar knowing of us is such that we recognize in it the infinite and eternal, compels us to respond "in the direct confession of the heart, 'Thou art my God'."² This is precisely the kind of knowledge which has arisen from the presence of Jesus Christ in its history and determines the direction of the Christian community's understanding of the unity of existence. While it is true that the initial thrust of that understanding is towards an integration of its life in its subjective, personal aspect

the revelation of the one God makes it possible and necessary to approach the multiplicity of events in all times with the confidence that unity may be found, however hard the quest for it... In this sense an external history finds its starting point or impulsion in an internal history.³

¹Ibid., p. 152.

²Ibid., pp. 153-154.

³Ibid., pp. 87-88; also Radical Monotheism, pp. 47-48, and "Faith in Gods and in God," pp. 125-126. See also Kliever, op. cit., pp. 52f. Kliever observes that the integration of the human self through the mediation of faith in Jesus Christ involved, in Niebuhr's thinking, the revolution of both man's practical activity and theoretical understanding. "The disclosure of God's absolute trustworthiness and universal cause calls forth a new order of divine-human and interhuman relationships." (p. 52) According to Kliever the unifying and transforming effects of God's self-revealing action were

That concept of divine personhood, as it was set forth in the first part of this chapter, can now be seen in terms of its internal coherence and consistency with the thoughts Niebuhr presented on the problem of history. To conceive of God as he who is acting, freely, faithfully and in genuine dialogue with men is to understand that no action, no event, takes place but that it is God who is acting, that his activity is independent of our actions, that it elicits trust and loyalty as genuine response to the absolute trustworthiness it discloses. God so conceived cannot be confined to the internal life of the Christian community. While the image of Jesus is essential for the Christian's apprehension of God as a person it is not evident that it is the only image by which such knowledge is possible for men.¹ Niebuhr's emphasis on the dynamic character of the integrative effect of revelation flows directly out of essential components which constituted his concept of divine personhood. The self-revelation of God presents to reason a reality that demands of reason a continuous development and critique of understanding. There is no "possession" of such a reality, nor can the thoughts that arise from experience of it be "defensive"

viewed by Niebuhr as vital to human wholeness. Kliever writes, "Thus, Niebuhr believes that Jesus Christ disclosed and mediates a radical faith which equips practical reason with the patterns and companions necessary for interpreting past, present, and future experience. Radical faith also liberates the pure reason to pursue knowledge of all natural, biological, psychological, and sociological phenomena without fear of undermining the self's center of value." (p. 54)

¹Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 249.

or "absolutized" or in any way "static."

The unity of existence, then, was, for Niebuhr, grounded in the integrity of a self who is revealed as the source, sustainer, and goal of all that exists, the radical act by which all actions are made possible, the oneness confronting us behind, in, and through the many, the initiator of dialogue in every event at all times and in all places, and the independent being whose very independence frees us from defending or guarding our thoughts and speech about it, ourselves, and the world. The theology of radical monotheism, according to Niebuhr, leads to reflection on the unity of existence, of thought, of action, of total life, as grounded in the person of God. To say God, for him, was to say person, and this expressed the ultimate ground of the unity of existence which man, unaided by God's self-revealing action, seeks but cannot find either in himself or in the manyness of his circumambient world.

CHAPTER FOUR

NIEBUHR'S ALTERNATIVE TO TROELTSCH AND BARTH

It has been suggested in this dissertation that H. Richard Niebuhr devoted much of his thought to the task of reconciling the interests of liberal and orthodox positions in Christian theology. He had learned to accept historical relativism as it emerged out of nineteenth century Protestant thinking and reached expression in the works of Ernst Troeltsch as well as the insistence upon the primacy of divine initiative in providing man with knowledge of God, as reaffirmed by Karl Barth. While he agreed that human thought and speech are subject to the limitations of spatio-temporal relativity, that both the human subject and the objects he experiences are conditioned by the particularity of space and time, he also maintained that in and through the relative conditions of the experienced world are grasped the objectively real and universally true.¹ A serious problem in theology, according to Niebuhr, was the persistent tendency to substitute either the activity of the subject or some aspect of the relativity of the objective world it apprehends for the real object that has made itself known as the oneness confronting man in and through the many. Niebuhr understood Troeltsch's emphasis on the radical relativity

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 18-22.

of finite existence to lead to a final statement of compromise, that is, the knowledge of God in every particular religious history is valid only for that history and in that history only, that is, it carries an absolute validity but in a limited cultural context. He understood Barth, on the other hand, to have emphasized the primacy and absoluteness of God's word revealed in Jesus Christ to the extent that, in Barth's terms, there is but one real history and authentic knowledge of God is possible only by attending to his presence in that history.

Niebuhr seemed convinced, however, that while God is truly known in his absoluteness through the action of Jesus in history, this did not preclude the possibility of his being known thusly in and through other events that take place.¹ For the Christian, knowledge of God involves the meeting of Jesus and those who have, in turn, also met him in their history, but that this knowledge is exclusively gained through that particular stream of life

¹While Niebuhr is closer to Troeltsch as regards the relativity of the Christian experience of the Absolute, he differs from Troeltsch insofar as the latter seemed to view Christianity as an illustration of the metaphysical principle of participation. (See above p. 24.) Niebuhr saw the Christian dilemma as more acute. Whereas Troeltsch seemed to think of the situation of the Christian as one in which compromise is inevitable and, therefore, one does the best one can to bring his faith commitment into relation with his culture, Niebuhr was convinced that knowledge of the Absolute called for uncompromising loyalty. See Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," pp. 249f, 260f, 270; and Christ and Culture, pp. 234f, especially p. 241; also Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 15-17.

in time and space would, in Niebuhr's estimation, be an absolutization of the relative and lead to a defensiveness in theology that would contradict the very content of the knowledge of God given in that revelatory meeting. While the Christian claims that the absolute is known in Christ he cannot at the same time claim that his knowledge is absolute. Yet because this knowledge has arisen from a particular, relative sequence of events, it does not necessarily follow that such knowledge is not of the absolute. To affirm that the absolute is truly known and at the same time affirm that this knowledge is relative, are affirmations that flow directly out of the experience of God as a person. This seems to have been the heart of Niebuhr's theology and the key for his alternative approach to the relativism of Troeltsch and the dogmatism of Barth. How he understood attentiveness to the concept of personhood as it arises from the experience of God in history to be the crucial key for combining the awareness of the relative and of the absolute, has been suggested in the preceding sections. By raising to prominence the four constant elements that appear in his writings as the underlying components of his conception of God, it is the present writer's position that an assessment of Niebuhr's approach can be more easily and accurately made.

Niebuhr's "correction" of Troeltsch and his general effort to make a theological "adjustment" to the new knowledge of historical relativism involved a re-affirmation of, rather than departure from, the fundamental tradition that understands theology as reflection on God and man as they are found together.¹ Theology begins with the knowledge that the manifold relativities of this-worldly existence are the actions of One absolute principle of being and that the manyness of the beings in and through which their principle acts is meaningful and worthwhile. That such is the case, Niebuhr argued, is knowledge that originates in the action of God freely initiating dialogue by concretely presenting himself to man as a faithful being. Such knowledge is, in its first moment, the knowledge of a person. But the content of such knowledge involves at once both absoluteness and relativity. It involves absoluteness in the sense that the object is present as the unified and unifying principle of all being and it involves relativity in the sense that until all of being is experienced, known and loved, the grasp of the relation between the unifier and the universe it embraces is incomplete. While the presence of God is acknowledged by men as that of a person because they have learned to identify themselves and certain of their companions

¹Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, pp. 112f; Christ and Culture, p. xii; The Meaning of Revelation, p. 8; Radical Monotheism, p. 12, 32-33; "Faith in Gods and in God," p. 116.

in the world as persons, that is, they have experience of active, free, trustworthy initiation of dialogue, the experience of God as a person, unlike other experiences, totally integrates the existence of the self and all existences surrounding it.

But, unlike Barth's position, the possibility of knowledge of God as a person, though essentially connected with Jesus as far as Christianity is concerned, was not, in Niebuhr's view, necessarily confined to one event in history. Moreover, Niebuhr insisted that the theology of the Church can only think and speak of God as he relates himself to the Church and not as he exists in and of himself.¹ This does not necessarily involve the denial that God is in se a person but only the rejection of reflection on God in his aseity as a proper theological task of the church.² In other words, God is known in the church as one who emerges in its history as a person and within the context of that concretely experienced relationship initiated by God, the church thinks and speaks about him. Niebuhr did not seem to intend that thinking and speaking about God outside of that context ought to be considered

¹Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, p. 112.

²In Radical Monotheism, Niebuhr wrote, "To be sure there are philosophers who develop a theory of God without reference to faith, but the relation of their metaphysics or ontologies to the theologies of faith remains the subject of many discussions." (p. 12)

meaningless or improper but rather his intention appears to have been one of more clearly distinguishing between reasoning as reflection in faith and reasoning in some other context. For Niebuhr, reasoning in faith meant reflection on God as he becomes known by concretely confronting man and eliciting trust in and loyalty toward him. Such confrontation and response is radically personal, that is not to say private but rather as a relation between persons. But in Niebuhr's works it becomes clear that the reasoning that arises in the event of God's self-revealing action and man's response in faith begins with the formation of a basic concept of the object eliciting faith as a free act of faithful being initiating dialogue. As a concept emerging with faith Niebuhr understood it as a rational representation of a reality that integrates but at the same time transforms the total life of the human self so that while the relativities of its historical existence are brought together as a meaningful whole, that which did so requires the self in its reasoning to develop that wholeness with respect to each and every relative being...a task Niebuhr saw to last beyond any one lifetime and ultimately to be completed only by God.¹ For Christianity this integration and transformation was begun and continues to take place by virtue of the concrete action of God in Jesus,

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. ix; also The Kingdom of God in America, p. xv.

the illuminating center of its history.¹ Christians possess the memory of Jesus but what happens to them through that memory is happening continuously, namely, God makes himself known as the self-same independent act of faithful being initiating dialogue with them.

The major thrust of Niebuhr's proposal, therefore, was to combine the knowledge of the radical historicity of human existence, that is, its inescapable relativity, and the knowledge of God as the absolute, sovereign source of existence in the manner that revelation seems to demand.

A. Barthian and Troeltschean Dimensions Modified.

1. Barth. For both Niebuhr and Barth, revelation meant that emergence of God as a person in human history. Niebuhr agreed with the Barthian emphasis on the primacy of God initiating in absolute freedom the knowledge of himself as the sovereign One who rules over the world as its creator, governor and redeemer.² But he also agreed with Troeltsch that theological reflection needed to include the historical relativism that permeates modern awareness so that thinking and speaking of God must consciously attend to the

¹Ibid., p. 177.

²James Gustafson indicated that Niebuhr developed his ethics according to this threefold distinction. The Responsible Self, Introduction, p. 30f.

particularity of standpoint in time and space. Therefore, with respect to Barth, Niebuhr considered the emphasis on Christ as the sole source of knowledge of God to be too exclusivistic and, in the end, unsuccessful because of man's inability to avoid the use of other symbols even in order to interpret the meaning of Jesus Christ.¹ Moreover, Niebuhr thought that the God-centeredness of Barthian theology had become an over-correction of the man-centeredness that had come to characterize Protestant theology after Schleiermacher.² While Niebuhr's approach clearly indicated the centrality of Jesus in the Christian's knowledge of God and was a consistently theo-centric approach, it insisted on maintaining the relativity connected with the event of Jesus and the relational aspect of God's self-revealing, that is, the knowledge of God in Jesus involves knowledge of God in relation to man and man in relation to God.³ For Niebuhr this meant that theology was reflection on God as he reveals himself to man and therefore both the absolute and the relative, the divine and the human, are held together in the reasoning that arises in faith. The concept that such reasoning is based upon is the concept of personhood,

¹Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, p. 158.

²Niebuhr, "Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century," in Religious Realism, pp. 413-428.

³Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, pp. 28-39; also The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, pp. 112-113.

for in Jesus is revealed the divine as a free, faithful act initiating dialogue with men, that is, as a person.

Barth's works, as it was pointed out earlier, indicate that his concept of God included the components we have discovered in Niebuhr's concept, and in that respect at least, they seem to have been in agreement. But it appears that, in Niebuhr's view, Barth's reasoning carried itself beyond the concrete context of the faith relation and to that extent seemed, on the one hand, an effort to grasp the essence of God in his aseity and, on the other, a search for apologetic principles, that is, epistemological grounds, to defend Christian knowledge of God as "right teaching, right doctrine," and Christian faith as fides, as assent."¹ For Niebuhr theology meant reflection on the content of knowledge given in faith as trust and loyalty which has for its object God relating to man, or, in other words, reflection on "personal relations."² The knowledge that God is a person is a consistent and continuous understanding of God but it is not complete or conclusive. The constants that Niebuhr's writings show to have been the essential ingredients of his concept of God bear this out. While God is conceived as a person through the

¹Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 250; also Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 128-131, and Frei, op. cit., pp. 86-87.

²Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 250.

experience of his self-revelation, the very content of that concept is such that the knower knows the known only insofar as he attends to the latter as present in every concrete situation. God and faith hold close together. Faith is confidence that God is present in every event, that every event is God acting. Such confidence is a gift, it is a miracle, and its presence in human history is inescapable.¹ But, as Niebuhr strongly emphasized, its intellectual and moral consequences are such that until all particular, relative beings are included in the knowing and loving response of man to God, the latter, although known to be the person who confronts man in the manyness of his worldly existence, is not yet fully known and cannot yet be conceived or expressed in terms of who he is in and of himself.

2. Troeltsch. As we have already pointed out in the preceding chapters, it was primarily from Troeltsch that Niebuhr learned to accept historical relativism and to

¹Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, p. 254; and "Faith in Gods and in God," p. 125. The thinking expressed in these works shows a definite Edwardsean influence. Hoedemaker suggests that this along with Spinosistic ways of thinking have to find a way of balancing with Barthian particularism, i.e., centering our knowledge of God, man and world in the Christ-event. Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 153-165.

see the problem this posed for Christian theology insofar as the latter persisted in attempting to defend its view as a superior interpretation of reality in the light of revealed knowledge of the absolute.¹ Niebuhr sought to explain the relation between the revealed knowledge of the absolute and the natural knowledge of the relativity of man and his world not in terms of philosophical a priori, as did Troeltsch, but rather in terms of the very content involved in the knowledge of God given in revelation. Those constants that constitute the conceptual content of God as a person demand of theology the same attentiveness to the relativity of the particular in which the universal makes itself known as that demanded of modern thought enlightened by advances in many other fields of inquiry, such as the natural sciences, sociology and history.² When

¹Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," pp. 94-97.

²Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 7-22. Niebuhr shared Troeltsch's concern to overcome the skepticism that appears as a result of heightened awareness of the relativity of existence. (See Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," pp. 96f.) In The Meaning of Revelation, Radical Monotheism, and The Responsible Self, Niebuhr clearly intended to affirm that the meaning and value of existence in relativity is given in the knowledge of faith, which is knowledge of person. While both saw the Infinite as manifest in the finite, the universal revealing itself in the particular, Troeltsch's basis was a metaphysical principle of participation, i.e., the finite spirits in the Infinite, and Niebuhr's basis was the concrete experience of relation between the self-revealing person, God, and the responsive person, man. Hoedemaker sees this difference as that of Niebuhr's theocentric-anthropocentric approach over against Troeltsch's rather neutral concepts of the universal and the particular. Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 16-17.

the latter become known as the action of a free, faithful being initiating dialogue with men

all relative beings may be received at his hands for nurture and understanding. Understanding is not automatically given with faith; faith makes possible and demands the labor of the intellect that it may understand.¹

Thus, while Niebuhr sided with orthodoxy and the Barthian emphasis on the primacy of God in bringing about knowledge of himself, he also maintained with the liberal tradition, as represented by Troeltsch, that the relativities of concrete historical existence are an essential part of that knowledge. That such is the case is argued by Niebuhr not on the basis of a metaphysical doctrine of participation but rather on the basis of the concrete experience of confronting the last power as a person. The resulting concept is a dynamic and transforming one that resists systematization.

For Troeltsch there seemed to exist the possibility of a system of philosophy within the framework of which a particular religion such as Christianity could express the knowledge of God given in its history. But, as Niebuhr saw it, the system implicit in Troeltsch's thought, which

¹"Faith in Gods and in God," p. 125-126. Niebuhr indicates that the question of superiority of such knowledge is irrelevant since a permanent revolution of mind and heart opening out into infinitely new possibilities takes place... gratitude, not boasting, is in order.

rested on the idea of western civilization as an organic whole whose unity was rooted in the identity of finite spirits with the infinite spirit, was a system in which religion and culture are caught up in a continuous compromise with respect to their claims on human loyalty. By viewing religion culturally, i.e., by taking the historical and sociological approach, Troeltsch's system was a philosophy of relativism. By viewing culture religiously, i.e., in terms of the metaphysical and ethical principles of participation and obligation, the system was a philosophy of the absolute. The result, as Niebuhr stated it, is a "philosophy of the relatively absolute" which, in the final analysis, Niebuhr saw as a "philosophy of compromise." The unresolved tension between the religious and cultural perspectives and the reference to a resolution of that tension in a life that lies beyond history caused Niebuhr to place Troeltsch among those who conceived the relation between Christ and Culture as a relation of paradox.¹

For Niebuhr that knowledge of God given in history is, indeed, knowledge of the absolute but only because it occurs in the concrete presence of the absolute. Because it is knowledge gained in the context of relation to the absolute the knower understands and accepts his own relativity precisely in terms of the absolute oneness before

¹Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, pp. 181-183; also "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," pp. 32, 89-91, 270.

him. And this latter point is the main issue in determining the manner in which Niebuhr conceived of his correction of Troeltsch.

Whereas Troeltsch sought to ground theology in a philosophy of religion,¹ constructed on the basis of a priori principles which were discovered in historical, epistemological and metaphysical analyses, Niebuhr clearly held the position that theology had as its own proper ground the concrete experience of the absolute confronting the believer in faith. A theology that is grounded in this experience does not begin with a theory about being, or thought, or history, or value.² Rather, theology begins with faith and for Niebuhr this meant the concrete existential setting of confrontation by the divine person and response by the human person.

Though the concept emerging from this situation can be formally expressed in terms of act, freedom, faithfulness and dialogue, (as was suggested in the preceding chapter), these components are subject to a continuous development.

¹Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," p. 86.

²Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, pp. 32-33; also "Faith in Gods and in God," pp. 1141, and Christ and Culture, pp. 234f.

in the concreteness of daily life wherein the reality which gives rise to their conception is present. It is, finally, faith that defines for us the content involved in the knowledge of God as the self-revealing One discovered behind, in, and through the manyness of life. Faith is given, it is a gift. But in each case it is particular faith and it is given under particular circumstances, that is, to individuals in an historical community.¹ Its "givenness" simply means that an event has happened, an action has occurred, an experience has taken place, or, as Niebuhr put it, the "great surd enters...is simply there," and once it happens "...there is no way of getting rid of it. It is in our human history."² On the basis of this event men reason, and what this amounts to is reasoning out of the experience of a "demonstration to selves of faithful, truthful being."³ It is reasoning as an effort "to understand on the part of selves who are deciding how to act in response to action upon them..."⁴ The content of such reasoning, then, involves the awareness of faithful activity, simply there, independent of our actions, and

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 37f.

²Niebuhr; Christ and Culture, pp. 254-255, and "Faith in Gods and in God," p. 125.

³Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, p. 46.

⁴Ibid., pp. 47-48.

inviting our response. While for Christians the content of such reasoning is given as that which is present in Jesus Christ this does not preclude the possibility of it being given in another way. Niebuhr understood this openness to other possibilities not on the basis of a metaphysical doctrine, such as Troeltsch's, but rather on the basis of the content involved in the concrete event of the particular rise of faith among Christians themselves. For this faith consists of the radical confidence that behind, in, and through all the manyness in which we live and which we know we are confronted by and we respond to a oneness who acts, acts freely, is faithful and invites dialogue. Such confidence prohibits the notion that its object is confined to only one event in history. It is the confidence given in one event, i.e., Jesus Christ, that the being who is present in all events is the self-same person.

Therefore, Christian theology does not reason on the basis of its consistency or compatibility with a philosophical system built upon the logical development of a religious or ethical a priori but rather on the basis of a concrete awareness of a person who is experienced as a continuing and, at the same time, unique presence. Reasoning faith, Niebuhr wrote, "looks for the presence of one faithful person in the multiplicity of events that happen to the self and learns to say 'There he is again'."¹ Each rediscovering

¹Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, p. 47.

of God's presence involves the experience of newness and yet also a confirmation that the new is one and the same with that which was experienced of old. Such is the "miracle" of faith which Jesus elicits from those who meet him in their history. The miraculousness of faith lies precisely in the fact that God becomes known as a person.

How is it possible to rely on God as inconquerably loving and redeeming, to have confidence in him as purposive person working towards the glorification of his creation and of himself in his works, to say to the great "It": "Our Father who art in heaven"--this remains the miraculous gift. So far as I could see and can now see that miracle has been wrought among us by and through Jesus Christ. I do not have the evidence which allows me to say that the miracle of faith in God is worked only by Jesus Christ and that it is never given to men outside the sphere of his working, though I may say that where I note its presence I posit the presence also of something like Jesus Christ.¹

B. Summary of the Alternative.

As an alternative approach for theology Niebuhr proposed a systematic development and critique of reasoning that begins with the concrete experience of God as a person. For Niebuhr to reason from faith meant precisely the reflective activity that follows upon the confrontation of man by the one who elicits a response of trust and loyalty. The miracle of faith is simply the transformation of man's natural distrust

¹Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 249.

of his ultimate environment to a confidence in it made possible by its demonstration of faithfulness. For Christians the event, of Jesus is the occasion in which this miracle occurs and therefore Christian theology involves the memory and image of Jesus. But it was Niebuhr's constant concern to show that the reality which is made known in and through Jesus is one that cannot be confined to one moment in history or held in static possession by human imagination. The reality which is present to faith is a person and the reasoning that follows upon such a presence pursues a course that resists static representation. The failures that have marred Christian thought were, in Niebuhr's view, failures to adhere to the fundamental principle of reasoning in faith which, for him, meant thinking and speaking in terms of selves, or persons. This was the key to his attempt at providing an alternative approach for theology which would overcome the apparent conflict between interests of liberalism and orthodoxy represented by Troeltsch and Barth respectively. By focusing on the concept of personhood that arises from the faith experience theology is able to articulate the fundamental understanding of the relation between the absolute and the relative, the divine and the human, the other-worldly and the this-worldly, which that experience conveys. The content of the concept of personhood, implicit in Niebuhr's writings and brought forward in the preceding chapter, is consistent with

Niebuhr's firm adherence to the radical monotheistic tradition which claims knowledge of the Absolute, and the acceptance of the radically historical character of human existence which requires man to acknowledge the relativity of his thought and speech about the absolute. Niebuhr's own appellation for the approach he proposed was "Confessionalism." Because we cannot escape our historicity and the relativity of our faith we must proceed, according to Niebuhr, "by stating in simple confessional form what has happened to us in our community, how we came to believe, how we reason about things and what we see from our point of view."¹ This is necessary not only because of our heightened awareness of relativity gained through natural reason but also because of "other considerations" which develop directly out of the awareness given in confrontation by the absolute.² The very essence of that revelatory event, the discovery of the "deity of God" which was clearly, for Niebuhr, the discovery of the divine as person, involves us in the confessional form of thinking and speaking. It requires us to think and speak in terms of an objective reality whose presence is such that it is recognized as the ever-active, ever-free, ever-faithful, ever-inviting-to-respond being in and behind the manyness of our world. Until

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 41

²Ibid., pp. 41-42.

that manifold world which circumscribes us has been exhausted our grasp of the divine is incomplete and our expression must take the form of confession; the primary utterance of which is the personal, direct address--"Thou art my God." To say to others what this means involves the formulation of the concept of personhood as it arises in that moment of self-presentation of the divine. It is clear that, for Niebuhr, the concept as it arises is seen to be a composition of dynamic elements which, while they are constant in their reference to the divine, are continuously expanding and deepening in their meaning.

It has been our purpose in this dissertation to show what the content of Niebuhr's concept of personhood was and how this serves in understanding his theological method. His contribution to theology is seen by this writer as most clearly represented in terms of the significance he placed upon the personalist dimension of faith. Although his works do not present us with a clearly formulated system they illuminate what he considered to be the systematic key for theology. What that systematic thought is has been indicated. It is the idea that radical monotheistic faith is rooted in the experience of God as an active, free, faithful being inviting man to genuine dialogue. To a large extent the second half of Niebuhr's career shows a consistent application of that idea to a variety of theological concerns which, in one way or another, were connected with what he considered a most important task to be accomplished by present day theologians--to combine the chief interests of Ernst Troeltsch and Karl Barth.

C. The Alternative in a Contemporary Context.

Niebuhr's personalistic confessionism may have special significance for a line of thought that has been developing in recent years within both the Roman Catholic and the Protestant Christian traditions. During the fifteen years since Niebuhr's death there has been considerable dialogue between representatives of these traditions regarding the question of approaching the problem of knowledge of God through analysis of the human subject. Commenting on the similarities that appear in the approaches of two outstanding thinkers, Karl Rahner (Roman Catholic) and Schubert Ogden (Protestant), one author pointed out that both

are one in insisting that one must, for good reasons, begin with the human subject. In other words, whatever else they conceive theology to be, they both insist that theology to be rightly understood must be seen as the self-reflexive and thematic expression of faith that has its original and proper locus in man's own mode of existential self-understanding.¹

While an analysis of the expressions of such thinking reveals the common commitment to begin with man it also shows that

¹Robertson, John C., Jr., "Rahner and Ogden: Man's Knowledge of God," in Harvard Theological Review, Vol. 63 (1970), p. 379. In this article and a later one, the author summarizes quite well the general climate of thought, the similarities and the differences, and the possibilities for a fruitful exchange between some thinkers who follow the post-Cartesian and Kantian "turn to the subject" within their respective Christian traditions. See also Robertson, "Tillich's Two Types and the Transcendental Method," in The Journal of Religion, Vol. 55, 2 (April 1975), pp. 199-219. Other recent publications indicate the nature of the issues raised in such dialogue; for example, the exchanges between Lonergan and his critics, both Catholic and Protestant, in Foundations of Theology, edited by Philip McShane (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1971).

this approach equally insists upon the possibility and necessity of theology to speak about God as well as man.¹ This latter insistence rests upon the results of analyzing ordinary human cognition and moral experience which shows that in both instances the knowledge of God is a co-awareness accompanying self-knowledge. The affirmation of God is the background ("horizon"--Rahner; "reality"--Ogden) which makes it possible to affirm that anything at all is intelligible, valuable, real.²

It is not possible to include within the scope of this dissertation a detailed presentation of the process of reasoning which leads to the positions expressed above, but it is possible to indicate the relevance of Niebuhr's thought to them in terms of the basic starting point and the final results of their approach as compared to his. The positions of Rahner and Ogden reflect the line of thinking within their respective traditions that recognizes the decisive importance of a philosophical foundation for theology if the latter is to fulfill its task in developing reflective understanding of faith.³

¹Robertson, "Rahner and Ogden," p. 390.

²Ibid., p. 391..

³See Schubert Ogden's contribution, "The Task of Philosophical Theology," in The Future of Philosophical Theology, pp. 55-84, and Karl Rahner, Theological Investigations, Vol. 13, translated by David Bourke, (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 61-79.

As yet another thinker connected with this approach put it

Its function is to advert to the fact that theologies are produced by theologians, that theologians have minds and use them, that their doing so should not be ignored or passed over but explicitly acknowledged in itself and in its implications.¹

To continue with the direction of thought of the above statement by Bernard Lonergan, the basic idea being developed among what appears to be an increasingly larger number of Christian thinkers today is that the human subject can appropriate its conscious activity of experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding, and in so doing, "add considerable light and precision to the performance of theological tasks..." This heightening of one's consciousness, according to Lonergan,

brings to light our conscious and intentional operations and thereby leads to answers to three basic questions. What am I doing when I am knowing? Why is doing that knowing? What do I know when I do it?²

The answers to those questions are, respectively, a cognitional theory, an epistemology, and a metaphysics which supply what Lonergan calls the basic anthropological component for theological method.

What the arguments set forth by these thinkers amount to is an attempt to demonstrate that God is the first

¹Lonergan, Bernard J. F., Method in Theology (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), p. 25.

²Ibid., p. 25.

principle of all our knowledge and that this foundational insight is gained by virtue of the human subject's own ability to appropriate its activities as a reasoning and valuing being.¹ The relationship between this natural knowledge of God and the knowledge of God given in revelation is seen as one of unthematic, implicit and general knowledge in relation to thematic, explicit and special knowledge, or the relation between basic existential faith and specifically Christian faith.² Thus theology is viewed as having two sources from which it derives its method or, as Lonergan put it, a basic anthropological component and a specifically religious component.³

In other words theological method is arrived at as follows:

The self-appropriation of one's own intellectual and rational self-consciousness begins as cognitional theory, expands into a metaphysics and an ethics, mounts to a conception and an affirmation of God, only to be confronted with a problem of evil that demands the transformation of self-reliant intelligence into an intellectus quaerens fidem.⁴

¹See Robertson, "Rahner and Ogden," pp. 394f.

²See Ogden, op. cit., pp. 76f; also Rahner, Hearers of the Word, translated by Michael Richards, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), pp. 111f.

³Lonergan, op. cit., p. 25.

⁴Lonergan, Insight: A Study of Human Understanding, (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1958), p. 731. For an illuminating criticism of Lonergan's approach see Schubert Ogden, "Lonergan and the subjectivist principle," in Language, Truth and Meaning, edited by Philip McShane, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972), pp. 218-235.

At the highest level of this self-transcending process there occurs religious experience which is the experience of God's love; it is the event in which the human subject's capacity for self-transcendence is filled, when the specifically religious component is introduced, i.e., the dynamism of God's love, and all human knowing and valuing is transformed. Faith is the knowledge born of such experienced love. In this view, theology becomes reflection at the level of transcendence wherein the human subject has experienced and responded to God's love.¹ On this last point there seems little reason to doubt that Niebuhr would have agreed. As for the systematic grounding of this theology in an ontology or epistemology based on the conscious appropriation of one's own rational and existential selfhood in which God is co-affirmed along with the self it is likely that Niebuhr would have resisted such an approach. In other words, there is a basic disagreement between Niebuhr's thought and those in the line of thought outlined above and that difference, it seems to the present writer, is precisely on the matter of the anthropological component in theology. Implicit in the statement that "theology finds its basis in the existential self-understanding of the human subject" is the idea that the human self upon which we reflect in theology is the self

¹Lonergan, Method in Theology, pp. 104, 115, 130.

that is known as "the central datum of metaphysical speculation."¹ It is this self (as well as the God co-known with this self) that is, as it were, carried over into theology and serves as a key for conducting the reflective process which leads to the conceptual formulation of the content of faith. Christian theology is seen, then, as reflection upon self and God as they are apprehended in the situation of concrete historical encounter, the normative instance being Jesus Christ. But it seems that the emphasis on the normative character of the Christ event is, in this approach, expressed in terms of its being the explicit, thematic and specific re-presentation of the self and God known implicitly unthematically and generally beforehand.

While there is some element of this in Niebuhr's own approach there seems to be a far greater emphasis on the transformative character of the Christ event and, as the preceding sections of this dissertation demonstrate, the key to his theological method is not the existential self-understanding of the human subject apprehended as the central datum of metaphysical speculation, but rather a concept of divine and human personhood the content of which is such that all prior thought about existence as person is subject to radical, permanent revolution. In other words, the relation between the knowledge of the self in relation to God conceived outside of the context of

¹Robertson, "Rahner and Ogden," pp. 380-389.

Christian revelation to the knowledge gained within that context was regarded by Niebuhr not so much in terms of the difference between implicit and general and explicit and special as the difference between an old development and a new beginning, an expectation and a fulfillment of it, in another manner than expected--even a putting of that expectation to shame. It was for Niebuhr, finally, neither a development nor an elimination of our former knowledge, but its "conversion and permanent revolution."¹ The anthropological component in Niebuhr's approach is the human subject as he lives not before or after but in the midst of a great revolution; it is the self as transformed in its thinking and valuing, in its total life.

This is not to suggest that the other line of thought fails to recognize, or even to some extent emphasize, the transformative character of God's self-manifestation in the Christ event. Rather our purpose has been to show that, in Niebuhr's view, this dimension was the ultimately determinative principle for theology and that which radically distinguished it from all other kinds of thought about God, the self and the world. One might say, then, that for Niebuhr, the anthropological component was so taken up into the religious component in Christian theology that any attempt to ground it in a philosophia perennis or a chastened Idealism in order to show that theology can and

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 182f.

must speak about God as well as man would seem, in Niebuhr's terms, at least, to suggest the defensive, apologetic tendency which he considered contrary to the very essence of the Christian tradition.¹

As the emergence of God in our history as a person revelation means the radical transformation of our own self-understanding as it is caught up in the person who creates the self, and, therefore, in attempting to say how this knowledge of God relates to our other knowledge of God we are also involved in attempting to say how our self-understanding before the self-revealing God is related to our other self-understanding.² This whole complex of understanding self and God before and after revelation with reference to Niebuhr's approach and the other line of thought under discussion serves to underscore the basic difference between them, namely, that the latter is primarily concerned to show that a sound theology is dependent in a way upon philosophical foundations and the former was determined to show that a theology consistent with the revelation of the one whom Jesus called "Father" was radically independent of philosophy, resolutely confessional and thoroughly personalistic.

¹How the anthropological orientation shared, for example, by Rahner and Ogden works toward a philosophical grounding of theology is outlined by Robertson. Cf. op. cit., pp. 390f. Niebuhr's concern about defensiveness in theology is a constant theme in his works. See for example, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. viii, 22f, 177f.

²Niebuhr; The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 173f, and Radical Monotheism, pp. 47f.

The preceding paragraphs give only a general and introductory notion of but one movement of thought currently developing among Christian thinkers and only briefly touches upon what may well be the most basic issue that emerges out of any attempt to determine the significance of Niebuhr's alternative in such a contemporary context. In spite of its generality and brevity, the discussion does indicate quite clearly that because his fundamental conviction that the cornerstone of Christian faith was the revelation of God as a person, the key concept for Niebuhr's theology was the concept of personhood as it arises from faith. It is precisely this latter emphasis which causes him to say of theology

It must develop its own methods in view of the situation in which it works and of the object with which it deals, without becoming the vassal of methodologies developed by rational inquiries directed toward other objects and existing in connection with other nonrational activities of men besides faith. Neither queen nor vassal among such inquiries, it must pursue its own way in the service of the God of faith and of his servants. That way, though independent, cannot be the way of isolation, unless the theology in question be concerned with some constricted, deistic faith, directed toward a little god, toward one among many objects of human devotion rather than with the faith that is directed toward the One beyond the many, in whom the many are one.¹

As our entire argument up to this point has tried to show, Niebuhr's alternative for theology--a personalistic confessionalism--was offered as a solution to the conflict between two main lines of thought represented by Troeltsch and Barth. As in the case of applying his thought to their

¹Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, pp. 15-16.

chief interests so in the case of applying it to those committed to beginning with the human subject the central issue remains, from a Niebuhrian point of view: How can Christian theology avoid defensiveness in its service of the God of faith and of his servants? It would not seem possible to do so and at the same time insist, as does Ogden, that theology must presuppose as a necessary condition for fulfilling its task an independent theistic metaphysics, or, as Rahner and Lonergan, a basic horizon, or "position," grasped by the self-affirming self-as-knower, expanding to a metaphysics and an ethics, and amounting to a conception and affirmation of God. Even though this line of thought is characterized as a system by its openness it would seem that for it to speak of the relation of natural knowledge of God and revealed knowledge of God as a relation of the general to the special, of the unthematic to the thematic, is to imply a bond between the philosophical and the theological expression strong enough to suggest grounds for defensiveness.

For Niebuhr, finally, Christian theology is revelation theology and revelation, as he understood it, turns against the self that would defend itself...even should it try to prove itself superior to philosophy.¹ As the emergence of God as an active, free, faithful being initiating dialogue, revelation is an event that happens over and over again,

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 176.

and what happens cannot be possessed, only confessed, and though we may use words that appear to have common meaning and appear to point to something common in our experience as humans, the relation between those common elements and the reality of which we speak is a relation of radical and permanent transformation.

CHAPTER FIVE

SOME CRITICS AND A CONCLUSION

By raising to prominence the elements that appeared in his writings as the basic components of his concept of personhood, it seems to the present writer that one can gain a better understanding of precisely how Niebuhr thought it was possible to accomplish the task of combining the interests of Troeltsch and Barth. Others have examined Niebuhr's thought and questioned or commented on the degree of success or failure suggested by his approach.¹ They have not, to this writer's knowledge at least, brought forward in their assessment of Niebuhr's theological method the implicit content of his concept of personhood. It seems appropriate, therefore, to examine some of the questions raised by other writers regarding this matter and to determine whether the approach taken in this dissertation might help in answering those questions.

Hans Frei suggested that while Niebuhr sought to express the content of Christian knowledge of God by means

¹Hans Frei, in Faith and Ethics, op. cit., pp. 64, 83f, 102f; L. Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 79f, 129f; Fritz Buri, How Can We Still Speak Responsibly of God, Fortress Press: Phila., (1968); J. B. Cobb, Jr., Living Options in Protestant Theology, Westminster Press: Phila., (1962), pp. 285-300. Sidney Ahlstrom, as we have noted above (p. 66), considered the Troeltsch-Barth polarity scheme inadequate for interpreting Niebuhr although he admits that both thinkers strongly influenced the latter. See "H. Richard Niebuhr's Place in American Thought," in Christianity and Crisis, XXIII (November 25, 1963), pp. 213-217.

of the concept of personhood he vacillated between "a dualism which can give no specific content except 'confrontation' to the concept and a relationalism that makes the content of the idea anthropomorphic."¹ Niebuhr was viewed by Frei, at the time the latter made the above statement, as having shared both Barth's and Troeltsch's concern to overcome the liberalism of nineteenth century thought which had become excessively man-centered. Frei questioned whether Niebuhr provided any more than a hint as to what the positive content of the concept of God might be in an approach that was at the same time theocentric and relativistic.² The hint, or clue, which Frei found in Niebuhr's thought was in a context which concerned the possibility of apprehending the personhood of Jesus.

In what he called an "isolated moment" in his technical theological writing Frei pointed to Niebuhr's suggestion that an inadequate, though no less truly indicative, interpretation of the essence of Jesus's personhood could be given in terms of an analysis of Jesus's moral activity.³

¹Frei, *op. cit.*, p. 102. Frei indicates that Niebuhr's apparent ambivalence was due to his concern for the concreteness of thought which he found lacking in Barth and Tillich, for example. Barth's emphasis on the knowledge of God as knowledge of this particular person was an abstraction beyond the concrete divine-human relation and Tillich's separation of the being of God from his personhood "submerges the existential nature of this relation..." (p. 103)

²*Ibid.*, pp. 93-94, 104f.

³*Ibid.*, p. 116. See Niebuhr's essay, "Toward a Definition of Christ," in Christ and Culture, pp. 11-29.

In the first chapter of Christ and Culture, Niebuhr was seen to have affirmed "much more boldly not simply the objectivity of a personal event but the knowability of something of its positive content."¹ The person Jesus is, according to Frei's interpretation of Niebuhr, is concretely embodied and exhibited in his moral virtues.

Thus, Frei concluded

In them one may find, by an historical and at the same time theological exegesis, in faith, hope and love, the unique moral Sonship to God of one who is completely at one with men.²

As the main source of the Christian's knowledge of God and man Jesus is for him the focal point of faith which involves him in a "double movement," i.e., toward the absolute, God, and toward the relative, man and his world, so that the divine-human relation is conceived to be a dynamic interpersonal activity.³ The knowledge of God involves a grasp of the unity of existence as a person as a unity demonstrated by the concrete moral activity of Jesus which can be understood in its radical character only as the activity of one who exists in relation to God.⁴ This relation to God is one side of

¹Frei, op. cit., p. 108.

²Ibid., p. 115.

³Ibid., p. 116. See Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, pp. 11, 28-29.

⁴Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, p. 27.

what appears, however, for it is also seen that the virtues of Jesus are directed toward man. The total moral life of Jesus is, then, a "continuous alternation of movements" the terms of which are persons, for the movements are acts of love, hope, faith, obedience and humility in response to loving, promising, faithfulness; commanding and exalting.¹ In the personhood of Jesus is discovered the personhood of God, but

The power and attraction Jesus Christ exercises over men never comes from him alone, but from him as the Son of the Father.²

What was crucial in this approach, according to Frei, was that the concrete historical phenomena, the teachings and acts of Jesus, were given as the direct clues to the unitary personal being, the personhood of Jesus.³ In this way it appeared that a fresh and highly suggestive direction was given to the search for a proper formulation of the content involved in the knowledge of God as it is received through his self-revealing in Jesus. Niebuhr's admission that a theological approach through the method of moral analysis needed to be complemented by other approaches (by metaphysical and historical interpretations, for example)

¹Ibid., p. 28.

²Ibid., p. 29.

³Frei sees this as an advance over the "psychological approach" that followed Schleiermacher and the "epistemological monophysitism" that seems to be involved in Barth's and Bultmann's approaches. The critical issue between these two views concerns whether the revelatory value of Jesus is to be ascertained by having recourse to the miracle of faith which, in turn, interprets the event of Jesus which need only be established by an historical fact, i.e., Jesus actually lived in history. Frei, op. cit., pp. 110-115.

was regarded by Frei as an indication that Niebuhr was, perhaps, developing a new concern that went beyond the question of method and turned to actual theological content.¹ Implicit in Frei's argument was the idea that if Niebuhr had continued to move in that direction he would have supplied further content congruent with the content achieved by metaphysical and 'historical' analyses.

In response to Frei's observations the first point we wish to make is that Niebuhr's essay in Christ and Culture does not seem to be a departure from his approach in The Meaning of Revelation and other writings. The argument throughout this present study has been that the content of Niebuhr's concept of personhood can be drawn out by attending to constants that appear in many of his works. Furthermore, the recognition that other portraits of Jesus may also be required, that a theological approach through moral analysis cannot claim superiority over others, was a consistent application of the principle expressed elsewhere, namely, that the revelation of God as a person requires human reason to develop in all its ways of working. While in and through Jesus, or some other event, God becomes known as the one who is acting freely and faithfully in dialogue with man, and because he is known precisely as such a one eliciting trust and loyalty, this happening requires man to seek rationality and unity in his whole history.²

¹Frei, op. cit., p. 116.

²Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 139.

It brings about a continuous transformation of all thought and life, a permanent revolution, an uncompromising, intensified and extended morality, a sense of time-full existence in which God is "compresent" and life-giving in a universal society in time without end.¹ The content involved in the knowledge of God given in revelation is such that while it leads us to think and speak of God as a person, i.e., includes conceptual and verbal constants such as those presented in the preceding chapters, it requires theology to take a confessional approach. Niebuhr's insistence on confessionalism is grounded in the faith-awareness of the absolute, the nature of whose presence in revelation demands the openness of mind suggested in his essay, "Toward a Definition of Christ." Rather than regard his remark that metaphysical and historical portraits can complement the theological to be a "startling admission," as Frei had stated, and the subsequent analysis a "turn to actual theological content," Niebuhr's presentation in that section of Christ and Culture may, contrary to Frei's interpretation, be regarded as quite consistent with his

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 168f, 182f, and "Faith in Gods and in God," pp. 125-126; The Gospel For a Time of Fears, passim, Christ and Culture, pp. 241, 248, 255f; Radical Monotheism, pp. 50-56, and The Responsible Self, pp. 86f, 94, 107, 145, 167.

earlier thinking.¹

The second point to be considered is in regard to Frei's having seen the problem in getting a clear concept of personhood from Niebuhr's writing to involve the tension between objectivity and relational thinking. On the one hand Niebuhr wanted to affirm the objectivity of a personal event and, on the other hand, he insisted on the relational character of knowledge of persons. To preserve objectivity, it seems Niebuhr retained the confrontational aspect and God was said to be known as our knower, our author, our judge and only savior.² Such knowledge is that of being known, being valued, etc., a negative kind of knowledge that gives us little or no positive content regarding the objective reality present in such experience.³ But, Frei pointed out, Niebuhr's "aversion to ontology or metaphysics--to any knowledge of God not given in relation with him--always limits him to reflection about being in terms of relational qualities."⁴ Thus it seems that since

¹In his article, "The Christology of H. Richard Niebuhr," Lonnie Kliever considers Frei to have erred in suggesting that Niebuhr departed from his approach in The Meaning of Revelation when he wrote the essay in Christ and Culture. Kliever wrote, "Frei sees a disparity because he misinterprets Niebuhr's theory of historical event and historical cognition as set forth in The Meaning of Revelation." In The Journal of Religion, Vol. 50, (January 1970), pp. 46-47.

²Frei, op. cit., pp. 83-84; see Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 152-153.

³Frei, op. cit., p. 84.

⁴ibid.

man has come to conceive of himself as a personal being the knowledge of God as a person may be merely a prescription due to the exigency of the human situation, and the question arises as to whether God is, in and of himself, a person.¹

The point of Niebuhr's approach seems to have been missed by Frei when he suggested that Niebuhr "vacillated" between epistemological dualism and anthropomorphism in attempting to formulate the content of the concept of God as a person. To the present writer it seems that Niebuhr's approach was to show that the knowledge of God as it arises in revelation involves both the confrontational and relational dimensions.

In the knowledge of other selves both the relationship and the related terms are different. This knowledge does not run from a subject to an object but from the other to the self and back again...knowledge of other selves must be received and responded to. When there is no response it is evident that there is no knowledge, but our activity is the second and not the first thing.²

What Frei interpreted as vacillation in Niebuhr's thought may be regarded, rather, as attentiveness to both aspects that had respectively been over-emphasized by one or the other theological tradition, i.e., orthodoxy and liberalism, in order to preserve what was true in each and, at the same

¹Frei, op. cit., p. 86.

²Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 145-146.

time, to show that in knowledge of God as a person neither confrontation nor relation alone is the key for formulating such knowledge.

The key, for Niebuhr, was the recognition that revelation involves the experience of a unity in which the concept arising from that experience expresses insight into elements not only of activity and freedom but also faithfulness and dialogue, not only being confronted by a being that acts and acts freely but by one who confronts as faithful friend and elicits the response of trust. The knowledge of God involves movement from other to self and back again. Such knowledge gives rise to a concept of God containing elements which stand for the experience of him as the one who confronts and whose confronting is relational. Because Jesus is the event in their history by which Christians experience God as the one who is acting freely and faithfully in dialogue, it is through him that they have learned to trust in God as companion, as friend, and to say, "Our Father," to confess "Thou...art my God." By the same token it is also through Jesus that they have learned that such trust involves a

permanent revolution, since it can never come to an end in time in such a way that an irrefrangible knowledge about God becomes¹ the possession of an individual or a group.

For Niebuhr the question as to whether God is--in and

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 182-183.

of himself--a person, was not in a strict sense a theological question, not faith reasoning. For faith is precisely the response of trust in and loyalty toward God as a person. The self-evidencing content of revelation is that God is, indeed, a person but the impact of this disclosure is such that man can never exhaust the possibilities of developing his reasoning in terms of the relational dimension of this knowledge let alone try to reflect on it in terms of which he has no concrete experience, and can never have, at least in this life, i.e., God as he is in himself.¹

Frei was clearly attempting to pursue an avenue of thought that Niebuhr himself showed little or no interest in pursuing, namely, that of moving from an account of God as he is pro nobis to God in se, from phenomenology to ontology.² It is just such a movement which Niebuhr apparently detected in Barth's later thought. Both Barth and Frei considered it important to move from God as encountered in his self-revealing action to God as he is in and of himself, to the being of God. Their purpose in doing so is part of the general problem of much modern

¹Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, p. 112; also Radical Monotheism, pp. 14-16; "Faith in Gods and in God," pp. 114-116; The Meaning of Revelation, pp. ix, 41-42.

²A similar attempt with respect to Niebuhr's reflections on the human self was made by Julian Hartt in his article, "The Situation of the Believer," in Faith and Ethics, pp. 225-244. See also W. R. Marry, "Faith and History in the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Drew University, 1970, pp. 88-102.

theological thought which has involved a reaction against the subjectivism of man-centered thinking since DesCartes and leading up to the present through such thinkers as Fuerbach, Nietzsche, and Sartres. But Niebuhr did not see the solution to be found in a Christocentric dogmatism (Barth) nor by having recourse to cognizing a metaphysical system upon which to ground theology (Troeltsch).

He saw the solution, rather, in the confessional approach to theology, an approach which is not conceived of or decided upon simply because human reason has come to recognize relativism, nor simply because reasoning in faith means to begin with miracle, which of itself has no rational defense. Confessionalism, for Niebuhr, was a means of combining the dogmatic and rationalistic elements of Christian experience insofar as it begins with the miracle of divine encounter and, at the same time, acknowledges the rational demands which precede, accompany and follow upon faith experience. Niebuhr recommended, however, resolute confessionalism which meant that reason, once it had before it the self-revealing action of God, must not attempt to move forward as if that action were completed and all that remains for it is to formulate the content of knowledge of God "objectively," that is, God as He is in Himself, before He is pro nobis. Not only did Niebuhr insist that theological thinking and speaking of God must begin in faith but he also insisted that it continue in faith, lest it lose sight of

the living God. When Niebuhr argued in The Meaning of Revelation, and subsequent writings, that theology begins in faith, and faith in knowledge of God as a person, he clearly indicated that the development and criticism in which reason engages cannot abstract from the concrete relation to God in the hope of grasping His being as a person in se. Such knowledge, if gained, would demand universal recognition and acceptance. If the lines leading to that knowledge are traced directly to the Christ event then the superiority of Christianity must be acknowledged. But for Niebuhr this was clearly contrary to the Christian experience. Whatever else the knowledge of God as a person given in faith contributes to a metaphysical doctrine of God it cannot, in Niebuhr's terms at least, be a grasp of God's own self-instantiating personal identity.

It needs to be pointed out here that Frei did not imply that Niebuhr's thought consciously headed in this direction. Rather, he suggested that Niebuhr's essay "Toward a Definition of Christ" seemed to contain possibilities that he (Frei) considered fruitful for the pursuit of his own interest, namely, a constructive account of the divine person disclosed in the Christ event. It is this writer's position, however, that Niebuhr would resist the interpretation Frei placed on his reflections in the essay cited above, at least with respect to the suggestion that its content could be used to

point, the way to an ontological formulation of God as person.¹

In connection with our response to Frei's suggestion, it may be useful at this point to examine what Fritz Buri had to say about Niebuhr. In the appendix to his book, How Can We Still Speak Responsibly of God? Buri offered a summary and critique of Niebuhr's thought, especially as it was reflected in The Meaning of Revelation.² While Buri considered Niebuhr's greatness as a theologian to lie ultimately in his rejection of the idea that knowledge of God is "possession," and also in his campaign against defensiveness in theology, he nevertheless found Niebuhr's advocacy of the

¹An illustration of Niebuhr's resistance to such lines of inquiry offered by Daniel Day Williams, who recalled his own experiences of this as follows: "Many times I ventured a counter thesis to (Niebuhr's) conception to theology. To relate myself to another self is to have an interpretation of selfhood, and that means to have a view of the being of the self, and therefore a view of being, a metaphysical insight. At times, I thought Dr. Niebuhr agreed that at least a generalized anthropology, if not a metaphysical doctrine, was involved in his personalist standpoint. But he resisted the explicit formalizing of a system of universal categories in theological method, and there the issue lies." Daniel Day Williams, "A Personal and Theological Memoir," Christianity and Crisis, XXIII, 20 (November 25, 1963), p. 212.

²Buri's critique shows he also weighed the content of Niebuhr's thought as expressed in other works, e.g., Radical Monotheism and The Responsible Self. Buri, How Can We Still Speak Responsibly of God?, Philadelphia: Fortress Press (1968), pp. 65-83; see also Thinking Faith, transl. Harold H. Oliver, Philadelphia: Fortress Press (1968), and "Toward a Non-Objectifying Theology," in Christianity and Crisis, XXVII, (May 1, 1967), pp. 97-99.

uniqueness of God's revelation in Jesus, along with an apparently genuine openness toward all other religions and philosophical standpoints, to be a position of such unresolvable tension as to render his attempt to combine Troeltsch and Barth unsuccessful.¹ Buri suggested that Niebuhr's weakness lay in his not having grounded his personalist approach in the natural awareness of the absolute, dichotomous subject-object structure of consciousness in which there appear four ungraspable, or non-objectifiable, realities: 1) the human self, or "I"; 2) the co-human self, or "Thou"; 3) Being-in-its-totality, which is like "nothing" to our thinking consciousness because it lies outside the subject-object schema of reality-for-us; 4) the absolute personal power which is the origin of Being and calls forth the human self to responsible personhood. Buri pointed out that Niebuhr had rightly recognized the duality inherent in our historical awareness (inner and outer history) but failed to ground this duality in the deeper and more encompassing context of our thinking consciousness.²

Although Niebuhr did not thematize, as did Buri, the non-objectifiable realities that come to the attention of thinking consciousness, these realities did seem to be present

¹Buri, How Can We Still Speak Responsibly of God?, p. 79.

²Ibid., pp. 79-80.

in Niebuhr's reflections, especially in The Responsible Self. Buri suggested in the conclusion of his critique some lines of thought to indicate that his program for a non-objectifying personalist theology found agreeable elements in Niebuhr's approach. For Buri, as for Niebuhr, the special event that took place in the relative and historical realm (within which "I" and "Thou" work out their destinies as calls to responsible personhood, in other words, the event of Jesus), is the possibility for faith because it is the occasion of the realization of unconditioned selfhood in an unconditional decision. The content of this symbol to which Christians look is "content not bound to a special time of revelation but to all mankind."¹

Buri implied that Niebuhr's thought was directed towards an expression of personhood, divine and human, as non-objectifiable reality the knowledge of which is always in community, in relatedness. It is knowledge which takes place, Buri held, in enactment, decision, or responsibility, toward that which is experienced within the natural subject-object structure of thinking-consciousness and as more or less subjective or objective, because it is mediated through appearances. But such experience points to the non-objectifiable immediacy mediated by appearances, and objective thinking can help clarify the situation, according to Buri, of existence or person.²

¹Ibid., p. 83.

²Between human persons the appropriate discourse corresponding to the awareness of the non-objectifiable, however, is myth and between the human person and the absolute power who calls forth responsible personhood it is prayer. Buri, Thinking Faith, pp. 48-57, and How Can We Still Speak Responsibly of God, pp. 26, 32f.

Both Buri and Frei, then, found in Niebuhr suggestive elements as regards the possibility of giving philosophical expression to the knowledge of God as a person. Frei seemed inclined to think that Niebuhr had opened a way to formulating a constructive concept of personhood on the basis of a moral analysis which sought to apprehend personal being directly, so that the metaphysical question, "What is the nature of the being whose actions may be characterized as 'moral' and whose moral acts are identical with his being?" can be met. Buri, on the other hand, interpreted Niebuhr as having gained, at least partially, an insight into the radical non-objectifiable character of personal existence. Personhood, for Buri, is a matter of continuous enactment in the situation of awareness that arises at the boundaries of our subject-object thinking consciousness.¹ Had Niebuhr placed the dichotomy of inner and outer historical consciousness in the larger context of thinking consciousness, the revelation of divine personhood in the special event of Christ, according to Buri, would then

¹Buri maintained that our anthropologies and our ontologies are thus testimonies and confessions of our self-understanding encompassed by Being-as-a-whole which ultimately transcend objective or scientific knowledge and must finally give way to knowledge of a special sort, i.e., knowledge of the non-objectifiable immediacies of self, other, the Naught into which Being as a whole disappears for thinking consciousness, and the absolute power that calls the self in community with others into responsible personhood. Buri, Thinking Faith, pp. 454; How Can We Still Speak Responsibly of God?, p. 80f; "Toward a Non-Objectifying Theology," pp. 97-99.

have been more clearly understood as regards its relation to man's natural disposition to transcendence.

Frei, on the one hand, had seen in Niebuhr's approach the possibility of moving toward an objective account of personhood. Buri, on the other hand, saw in Niebuhr an appreciation for the non-objectifiability of personhood and the idea of personal knowledge as primarily a matter of enactment rather than conceptualization. It is our view that Niebuhr's reflections on personhood suggest a greater affinity to Buri's line of thought,¹ but also that the conceptual content which emerged from our analysis of Niebuhr's writings indicates he understood that a stronger, more intimate relationship existed between the speculative and practical dimensions of faith thinking. In other words, the actual content of the concept of God as a person emerging from faith reasoning, although composed of objectifications of the essentially non-objectifiable reality appearing within the realm of the historical and relative, is, nevertheless, grounded not in the complexity of appearances but the concrete unity of the one who appears. The permanently revolutionary character of the divine person's self-revealing

¹Buri's studies with Bultmann brought him into a line of thinking which Niebuhr himself considered more compatible to his own thought. Buri, however, went beyond Bultmann and, to that extent, in a direction away from Niebuhr as well.

action did not mean for Niebuhr that our concept of God as person is subject to continuous transformation because between the reality of God and the appearance of that reality there exists no real identity but rather because revelation is the occasion of coming to know that the unity disclosed in one event is the unity that exists in all events...this would also include our subject-object thinking. Such thinking events become, in faith, real enactments of theretofore non-objectifiable existence. Where Buri suggests that our attempts to express faith by means of our objectifying thinking are occasions of transgressing our finitude, and this being what is basically described in the doctrine of original sin, Niebuhr, on the other hand, would seem to have understood such attempts as demanded by faith.¹ The sinfulness that might be associated with our thinking, for Niebuhr, does not lie simply in our attempts to objectify the non-objectifiable reality that appears at the boundaries of our finitude but rather in our natural distrust of reality.² Buri criticized Niebuhr's appeal to radical confidence in God on

¹See Buri, "Towards a Non-Objectifying Theology," and How Can We Still Speak Responsibly of God?, p. 60f; Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, pp. 47-48 and p. 98-99; and "Faith in Gods and in God," pp. 125-126.

²See Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner," in Journal of Religion, XV (1935), pp. 272-280, and The Responsible Self, pp. 136f.

the grounds that he had given no real basis for that confidence other than its fittingness in using it to interpret the world. For Buri such confidence would seem rather to stem from a natural awareness of the call to responsible personhood being given a guarantee of the possibility of fulfillment in the special event of Jesus' unconditional response. Buri recognized, in other words, a general or natural revelation and a special or supernatural revelation and understood their relationship in terms of a radical consciousness of the non-objectifiable.¹ The non-objectifiability of the person who calls and who is called was, for Buri, crucial for understanding of personal existence as enactment and this, in turn, was a key for the Christian theological understanding of the meaning of God's self-revealing action in Christ. Buri thought that Niebuhr's approach suggested a monistic view of God's activity which was not appropriate to the New Testament eschatology and the traditional Christian acknowledgement of a double revelation.²

¹Buri, How Can We Still Speak Responsibly of God?, p. 39.

²Ibid., p. 78. Hoedemaker pointed to Edwards and Spinoza as significant figures in Niebuhr's thought on the pervasiveness of God's presence in the world. He suggested that Niebuhr's emphasis on the one divine action had a paralyzing effect on his understanding of the relation between history and eschatology. Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 155f, 159f. 0.

Thus the revelation of God in Christ would seem to be the occasion for recognizing the pervasiveness of God's active presence in the world, and have the effect of reducing the crisis element in the life of the faithful and the sense of openness to other religious views.¹ Our analysis of Niebuhr's thought, however, seems to warrant a different assessment. The concept of God as a person which emerges from Niebuhr's writings indicates that while acknowledgement of God as the person who is acting in all actions upon us is given in Christ, this knowledge reduces neither the sense of crisis nor of openness. In the first place, the concept involves the experience of absolute freedom of action on the part of God. Secondly, it involves the experience of the indefectible loyalty of God toward the whole realm of being. Finally, it involves the experience of invitation to dialogue so that the total life of man, intellectual as well as moral, is "a continuous life which opens out infinitely into ever new possibilities."²

The components of act, freedom, faithfulness and dialogue are more than mere "clarifications" of the situation in which we become conscious of our call to personhood before the personal power that is the origin of being; as Buri would have it.³ Our reading of Niebuhr suggests, rather, that the

¹Buri concludes, then, that Niebuhr's goal of combining Troeltsch and Barth is impossible. Buri, How Can We Still Speak Responsibly of God?, p. 79.

²Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God," p. 126.

³Buri, Thinking Faith, p. 46.

conceptual content that arises in faith is an integral part of the real transformation process initiated by God in his self-revealing action. As such it is always thinking in faith, that is, in concrete living relation to God, in a revelation which, as Niebuhr once put it, is "less the disclosure of the essence of objective being to minds than the demonstration to selves of faithful, truthful being."¹ The concept of God, for the believer, is one that is always forming, is in permanent crisis, is ever open, because, for him, it is the concept of a person. It is a concept of God as a person and not a conceptualization of the situation in which God appears as a person. To that extent the existential truth of the crisis which the New Testament presents to us is in Niebuhr's thought more a crisis of faith, whereas for Buri it appears more a crisis of reason.²

Our presentation of the concept of personhood, as it emerged from Niebuhr's writings, has been a modest attempt to clarify the sense in which his approach offered a distinct alternative to the revelational dogmatism of Barth and relativism of Troeltsch. In summing up our reply to Frei's and Buri's critiques of Niebuhr's approach, especially as

¹Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, p. 46.

²Buri, How Can We Still Speak Responsibly of God?, p. 79; see also Thinking Faith, pp. 43-50, where Buri designates as faith, "the act of becoming aware of this situation in which we become conscious of our responsibility and of the mystery of Being and through which consciousness we come to ourselves." p. 46.

regards its personalist dimension, two basic points may be given special emphasis. On the one hand, the concept of personhood gained through faith in God's self-revealing activity in Jesus is such that for the Christian at least it cannot be separated from the concrete encounter with God in Christ. Thus it appears that, for Niebuhr, the movement from encountered activity to the being of God is not a theological possibility. Frei's suggestion that such a move might be made on the basis of what is contained in the concept of God as he is before us in faith was made on the grounds that in the absence of all ontology the understanding of personhood is caught between dualism and anthropomorphism.¹ By maintaining that Niebuhr's moral analysis of the person of Jesus suggested that the teaching and acts of Jesus were a direct clue to his being, Frei concluded that this approach may have provided the means for overcoming the ontological gap in Niebuhr's thought. It seems to this writer, however, that while Niebuhr admitted the need for historical and metaphysical portraits to complement the moral portrait of the personhood of Jesus he also insisted on the inadequacy of all such approaches and, therefore, reaffirmed the radically relational aspect

¹Frei, op. cit., p. 103.

of knowledge of the Divine as 'Person.'¹ On the other hand, Niebuhr's reflections indicate that the conception of God as a person does not merely point to the situation in which the Divine Person appears but rather points to the Divine Person directly and is part of, or caught up in, the dynamic transformation of total life which that personal presence initiates and continues. The components of the concept of the Divine Person which emerge from Niebuhr's writing are clearly consistent with his program to present the content of Christian knowledge of God in such a way as to preserve the sovereignty and absoluteness of God, knowledge of the dependence and relativity of man, and, to that extent, assiduously avoid the grave mistake of defensiveness in our thinking and speaking of God.

Some have approached Niebuhr's personalism from a slightly different angle and found it to be problematic in terms of his convictions about the nature of radical monotheistic faith and the necessity of taking a resolutely confessional approach in presenting it.² The problem involves the definition of radical faith as trust in the

¹Niebuhr's insistence on concrete encounter as a sine qua non for communicating the reality of our existence before God is a constant theme. Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, p. 218, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 132-137, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 251, Radical Monotheism, p. 28, The Responsible Self, p. 175f.

²John B. Cobb, Jr., Living Options in Protestant Theology, Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press (1962), pp. 296f; also Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 129f.

principle of being and value itself and explaining that trust as the result of the principle of being and value revealing itself to be a person.¹ This event, according to Niebuhr, because it takes place in history and involves a particular faith, can be dealt with

only by stating in simple, confessional form what has happened to us in our community, how we came to believe, how we reason about things and what we see from our point of view.²

The problem is whether one can be consistently confessional when the object, affirmed to be a person, is the principle of being and value and the same object has been experienced by others as impersonal and is so affirmed. In other words, can theology be consistently confessional and personalistic at the same time?

John B. Cobb, Jr., insisted that there must be limits to the compatibility of views much as we may recognize the relativity of human knowledge.³ To think and speak seriously of God as a person, as Cobb thought Niebuhr did, would seem to demand that an apprehension of God as an impersonal being be viewed as inferior. Cobb wrote:

However tolerant we may be toward those who have not experienced God in this way (i.e., as a person), we must frankly admit that they are failing to see something that is

¹Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism, pp. 32f, 44f.

²Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 41.

³Cobb, op. cit., p. 297f.

really there for them to see and that their statements to the contrary are erroneous.¹

The following statement of Niebuhr strongly suggests an apologetic for radical monotheism.

To the monotheistic believer for whom all responses to his companions are interrelated with his responses to God as the ultimate person, the ultimate cause, the center of universal community, there seem to be indications in the whole of the responsive, accountable life of men of a movement of self-judgment and self-guidance which cannot come to rest until it makes its reference to a universal other and a universal community, which that other both represents and makes his cause.²

Cobb did not think Niebuhr's confessionalist approach was adequately grounded, and subsequently the latter's personalistic doctrine of God was weakened. He accuses him of supporting confessionalism with confessionalist affirmations.³ According to Cobb it is in terms of non-confessional principles that confessionalism can be held as the only legitimate expression for Christian faith.⁴

¹Ibid., p. 298. Hoedemaker also questions whether the confessional attitude Niebuhr requires of Christian theology does not, perhaps, always involve some apologetics. See Hoedemaker, op. cit., p. 129ff. Hoedemaker cites Cobb and Kenneth M. Hamilton, Kenneth Cauthen, and Lonnie Kliever as raising the same question. (Reference to sources are given in Hoedemaker's book, p. 192.)

²Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, pp. 86-87.

³Cobb, op. cit., pp. 299-300.

⁴Cobb stated that "relativity of knowledge and experience as an objective fact must be affirmed on empirical and phenomenological grounds." Ibid., p. 300.

Either something like a natural theology would be required to establish those principles or one might accord no authority, as regards theological affirmations, to human knowledge and have recourse to a thoroughgoing theological positivism.¹ What is ultimately at stake here is Niebuhr's confessional affirmation that God is a person, for that affirmation is the very heart of his argument in which the confessionalist approach is presented as the only proper way to deal with the subject of revelation. Cobb wondered if the Christian experience of God is so relative that it must recognize its perception of God as a personal being and an opposite perception as each partially true.² Such seems to be the consequence of Niebuhr's confessionalism. Cobb rejected the idea that there is not objective ground given for discriminating and objectively judging the merits of one revelation over another by virtue of one pointing to specific aspects that are illuminating and the other not being able to do so.

In responding to Cobb's criticism the first thing to point out is that Niebuhr's confessionalism is not put forward simply as a necessity of natural human awareness of

¹Because Niebuhr moved in neither of those two directions and left his confessionalism unvindicated by nonconfessional principles Cobb does not see Niebuhr giving a clear alternative for theology.

²Cobb, op. cit., p. 297.

the relativity of human knowledge, or simply as a necessity arising from the nature of the object of faith, namely, the living God whose self-revealing activity demands that the human subject recognize the poverty of its thought and speech. Rather Niebuhr's confessionalism stems from the double necessity imposed by faith as well as reason. Niebuhr does not deny the irrational origin of Christian faith but neither does he deny that it can be rationally explicated.¹ What he does reject is an over-emphasis on either the irrational or the rational dimension of faith which leads away from the object of faith toward the subject.² Confessionalism is clearly called for by the natural awareness of relativity in modern times especially as it has found expression through the work of historians and social scientists. It is also demanded by the object of faith, i.e., God confronting man in history as a person. While Niebuhr clearly intends to show that God's self-revelation involves genuine knowledge of God, rationally explicable, the rationality of such knowledge is not a matter of defensive argument but is, by its very nature, confessional in character. Here the earlier presentation

¹By "irrational" is meant the inexplicable givenness of faith. See Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," pp. 163, 198; also Christ and Culture, p. 254.

²Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 38.

of the constants which Niebuhr's writings suggest are the content of the concept of God arising in faith may help in making a better assessment of his approach as an alternative.

Revelation gives rise to knowledge of God that not only demands rational development but also prohibits defensiveness in that reasoning.¹ The rational content is composed of elements that by their very nature require continuous correction and conversion yet stand for a unified reality and maintain their stability in referring to it. God is always known in radical faith as one who acts, acts freely and faithfully, initiates dialogue. Such becomes the content involved in the knowledge of God through revelation. Reason is focused on an objective reality that is before it as a dynamic being who is known precisely and only in dialogue, as faithful, independent of the human subject, as pure activity, that is to say, as a person. The dynamic dimension of the concept of divine personhood in Niebuhr's thought cannot be emphasized enough. This dynamism, as he saw it, was rooted in the concrete interaction between God and man in which the latter is continuously experiencing the transforming effects of being confronted by the former as a person. When the principle of being and value reveals itself as a person, in the above terms, to engage in reasoning that assesses other concepts of the ultimate, e.g., impersonal,

¹Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 175f.

or that concerns itself with defensive, apologetic interests, is no longer to reason in faith. But in Cobb's view to maintain that God manifests himself as a person in a particular revelatory event necessarily involves an apologetic. He insists that Niebuhr must "either go further or else draw back from some of his own relativistic assertions."¹ Dissatisfied with what he understands to be Niebuhr's poorly grounded confessionalism, Cobb's conclusion is that Niebuhr does not offer a clear alternative to natural theology or theological positivism. It is the present writer's view that Cobb's criticism of Niebuhr's confessional approach was based on an incomplete understanding of the criteria.

While it is true that Niebuhr emphasized the heightened awareness of the relativity of all thought and experience as a development of natural reasoning, especially in the work of historians and social scientists, it is no less true that he emphasized with equal, if not greater, vigor the profound awareness of our relativity imposed upon us by the object of faith. The "impact of God's self-revealing action transforms our sense of relativity and neither eliminates nor supplants it, nor merely substantiates it." The meaning of our existence in relativity is rather "painfully transformed" in what becomes a "permanent revolution" so that revelation turns against the self which would defend itself.² In the

¹Cobb, op. cit., p. 300.

²Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 182-183.

final analysis, Niebuhr's confessionalism is grounded in faith, not natural reason, and the personalist dimension of that faith, which most clearly indicates the nature of the relation between the double awareness of our relativity before the absolute.

A confessional approach which takes seriously the claim that God is a person need not necessarily engage in defense of that claim, especially when, as was the case with Niebuhr, the claim itself is caught up in the relativity exposed by the divine presence. Once again we may point to the components of Niebuhr's concept of God as a person to clarify the sense in which he understood his approach as an alternative that might save Christian theology from the defensive thinking that he saw developing out of both the Troeltschean and Barthian approaches. By recognizing the importance of these components we may also add a dimension to the argument of another interpreter of Niebuhr, i.e., Hoedemaker, who saw in Niebuhr's "style" the suggestion of a direction for theological thought in the wake of such thinking as Troeltsch and Barth represented.

In his book, The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr, Hoedemaker suggested that Niebuhr's contribution to contemporary theology consists primarily in the particular style with which he approaches the dilemmas of his theological heritage and with which he reacts to those who largely determine the direction of theology today.¹ Two themes determine Niebuhr's style,

¹Hoedemaker, op. cit., p. 149.

according to Hoedemaker, sovereignty and pluralism. These Niebuhr set forth in the special context of the religious history of American Christianity and in his reactions to European movements toward either orthodoxy or liberalism. In the final analysis, however, Hoedemaker sees the major weakness in Niebuhr's thought to lie in his theocentric correction of Troeltsch which involved emphasis on the pervasive presence of God in total life. This Edwardsean element in Niebuhr's thought suggests a subordination, and ultimately a subsumption, of historical relativity into eschatological relativity, of hope into resignation, of time into eternity. This, according to Hoedemaker, raises the question as to whether "historical revelation is genuinely possible or even necessary."¹ Hoedemaker seems to imply that Niebuhr's emphasis is therefore on sovereignty at the expense of pluralism, absoluteness over against relativity, and to that extent may represent a shift from man-centeredness to God-centeredness, from subjectivism to objectivism, which would show Niebuhr's approach to be essentially a de-Christologized Barthianism. The problem with Niebuhr's thought, which might lead to such an interpretation, is "a basic unclarity as to the relation

¹Ibid, p. 154. See also Buri's comment on the monistic structure of Niebuhr's view of God's activity. Buri, How Can We Still Speak Responsibly of God?, p. 78.

between the system of being and the context of history."¹

It involves the presence, in Niebuhr's reflections on the nature of God, of the tendency to interpret God as the structure in things, "the way things are," to speak of God as "being itself," along with the tendency toward a personalistic interpretation which speaks of God as "an active . . . self."² From Hoedemaker's point of view the former tendency seemed more dominant or at least the identification of God with being, the subsuming of ontology by theology, may be too easily made. From our point of view the concept of God as a person which emerges from Niebuhr's works suggests rather, that the relation between the system of being and the context of history is clarified by Niebuhr in terms of its being the relation between the system of being emerging as a self in the context of history of selves.³ This suggests, further, that the eschatological dimension of God's active presence in total life does not cause us to take the position of resignation .

¹Ibid., p. 155.

²While Hoedemaker acknowledges Niebuhr's personalism especially in his treatment of the latter's ethical reflections, he does not develop this aspect sufficiently and, in this writer's view, gives an unbalanced perspective on the relation between the two tendencies mentioned above. Hoedemaker, op. cit., p. 105.

³Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 152-155. See also Leo Sandon, Jr., "Jonathan Edwards and H. Richard Niebuhr" in Religious Studies, Vol. 12, No. 1 (March 1976), pp. 101-115. Sandon agrees with the point made by Julian Hartt, namely, that as a "confessing theologian" Niebuhr did not engage in epistemological or ontological analyses (as did Edwards) because he saw the theologian operating as the "beneficiary of the labors of others in his tradition, as in other Christian traditions as well, at this and many other points." Hartt, "Theology of Culture" in Review of Metaphysics, VI (1953), p. 507.

toward our fate as historically relative but rather to understand it in terms of responsibility.¹ Genuine dialogue, not paralysis, is the result of Niebuhr's personalism and this because the very content of our knowledge of God given in faith includes response as a component in the concept of God as a person. In a very true sense Niebuhr's own style of theology was a living testimony to his particular insight into the personalist dimension of faith, as Daniel Day Williams pointed out when he wrote that Niebuhr "was more concerned with the dialogue than with achieving a systematic outcome."² This is not to say that Niebuhr's only contribution to theology is a matter of style, that he concerned himself only with methodological problems, but rather that for him the method of theology was determined by the basic content of thinking faith which, as we have tried to show, involved the concept of God as a person.

Conclusion

The task that was set at the beginning of this study was to draw from Niebuhr's writings what seemed to be the

¹The idea that there was an element of Spinozistic neo-Stoicism in Niebuhr's thought was suggested by Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 155, 163. See also R. E. Crouter, "H. Richard Niebuhr and Stoicism," Journal of Religious Studies, 2:129-46 (Fall, 1974).

²Daniel Day Williams, op. cit., p. 210. Hoedemaker cites Niebuhr as having said in one of his lectures, "Our real concern in the church is with the dialogue rather than the kerigma." Hoedemaker, op. cit., p. 137.

essential components in his conceptualization of personhood as the product of radical monotheistic faith, and to show their role in what we consider to be a unique alternative for theology today. Midway in his career he made it clear that a theology which begins with revelation and reflects on the faith elicited by that event must "think and speak in terms of persons," and the basis for this is because "revelation...is the revelation of a self...the emergence of a person." Niebuhr was convinced that such reasoning must meet the challenge of "natural insights" gained throughout human history by trying to show not only how revelation relates to other ways of knowing God but also to new knowledge gained naturally by man about himself and his world.

It became a serious concern to Niebuhr that the alternatives being offered in theology, as well as the lives being lived in the church, were too often extremisms of God-centeredness or man-centeredness. Niebuhr himself repeatedly noted the dangers of excessive emphasis on the other-worldly and this-worldly aspects of Christian life. His writings were a demonstration of the self-correction he believed to be an integral part of monotheistic faith-existence. In all his thinking the themes of monotheism and transformation appear. Underlying this was the basic conviction that the meaning and value of existence is to be found in the revelation of God as a person. Monotheism, as it exists incarnate and

revealed in the world, is that faith which has come to understand the One beyond the many, the principle of being and value, as a self, a person. This was the cornerstone of radical faith. The effect of God's self-revelation is permanent revolution, continuous conversion, metanoia. The transformation of all life and thought by God's self-revealing action is the real basis of Niebuhr's alternative-- a personalistic and confessional theology. Its chief task is to express the content involved in the knowledge of God as he has revealed himself. Theology must express, in other words, what it means to say, "God is a person." This seems to have been the chief thrust of Niebuhr's thought. Theology must be confessional because its thinking and speaking is of God as one who is experienced as a free act of faithful being in dialogue. Theology is confessional because in faith God is known as a living, personal God. The conception of God as a person is, in one sense, a continuous process because the reality before the mind is ever-active and absolutely free being, faithful in all that happens, inviting dialogue in every event. The concept is, as it were, always being filled out and for that reason is relative. Therefore the expression of the content of knowledge of God can only be confessional. The consciousness of relativity in our life of thought which has been heightened in our day only confirms what Niebuhr insists has been the constant truth revealed to man--that God alone is One, and that Oneness is a unity or integrity who confronts us as a person. Our radical relativity is exposed to us in the presence of such

Oneness. Our own awareness of the dis-integration of our existence as subject-selves, of the disparity between knowing and doing in our conscious lives, the incompleteness of those acts, of the dependent seeking to be independent, especially as regards time-full existence, of the distrust of beings, and being itself, seeking to trust, and of existence as selves with other selves in disunity seeking universal community¹--this awareness of ourselves has been confronted by a Oneness whose integrity is that of a self. "But this selfhood is not as we have come to conceive of our own selfhood, real or ideal. The One who reveals himself is not conceived in faith as a person because of an anthropomorphic need. God is not thought of as if a person because of the exigency of our situation. Niebuhr expressed his awareness of the danger of anthropomorphism in speaking of God as a person but insisted that thought and speech about the source of our being as a "Thou," a self, expressed the very cornerstone of radical faith, i.e., the conviction that the Oneness that reveals itself is a person. According to Niebuhr, it is not the condition of man that determines the nature of the relationship between God and man but rather the conditioner, God. As our thoughts about deity so our thoughts about personhood are transformed by the self-revealing God. The illumination of our lives as selves by the infinite self is not a development of previous ideas but their conversion.

¹Themes which Niebuhr treated in The Responsible Self.

Moreover this conversion is not a completed action but a continuing process. Its continuing character is contained in the fact that the concept of God which emerges from the concrete event giving rise to radical faith involves the recognition of deity as one who acts, acts freely, is faithful and initiates dialogue. Such a conception of God is inherently dynamic, it is itself an endless task. Its fulfillment can take place only as an integral part of the ongoing relationship between the initiator and responder in which faithfulness responds to faithfulness, freedom to freedom, action to action, these being the fundamental conceptual components by which reference can be made to what is essentially one reality, the ultimate unity of personal existence in, with and through God. Such is the meaning which revelation places upon our existence.

Revelation meant revolution, for Niebuhr, The revolution is initiated by God, continued by and with him, and ultimately completed by him. It is a revolution that presupposes and transforms our natural reasoning about him, and about ourselves and our world in relation to him. Defensiveness is out of the question here. But this is not to say that what such a revolution is and does cannot be made visible rationally, it means rather that in our rational life, as in our total life, all thought and speech, all our actions, are expressions of that one revolutionary fact.

Our discussion throughout this dissertation has been aimed at showing how Niebuhr's concept of God as a person

was truly consistent with and integral to the confessional approach which he proposed as a theological alternative. By bringing forward the conceptual expressions which appeared as constants in his references to God as a person the sense in which Niebuhr understood his approach to combine the interests of Troeltsch and Barth comes more clearly into view. The primacy of God, his absolute sovereignty and freedom, and the dependence of man, his finitude and relativity, remain central facts of theology, and their meaning more clearly understood. The absoluteness of God and the relativity of man are grasped in faith as fundamental realities of existence which, in the final analysis, is seen as a dynamic interpersonal relationship. As human reason exercises its powers in the light of the Divine Person's self-revealing action it does so in the knowledge that the object upon which it reflects is not a being which it can possess in thought, or in a system of thought, but rather it is one in whose presence the one who reasons and reasoning itself are continuously transformed. To know in faith, in other words, is to come to selfhood in the continuously unfolding presence of the Divine Self in the world. Our analysis of Niebuhr's thought suggests, finally, that the major themes of monotheism, transformation, and confessionalism may, perhaps, be regarded as themes developing out of what was, for him, the very cornerstone of radical faith--"that the principle of Being is the First Person."

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