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**Crucial Faith:  
The Theology and Ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr**

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**Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
(Ph.D.)**

**To**

**The University of Glasgow**

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## Abstract

The argument of this thesis is that H. Richard Niebuhr has produced a distinctive, indeed, unique *theologia crucis*. Although Niebuhr never made this motif the explicit focus of his work, his writings, nonetheless, demonstrate a perennial reference to, and penetrating grasp of, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as the defining events of the Christian gospel.

After a short introduction to Niebuhr's life and work, and a brief discussion of that tradition which gives prominence to the theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*), an exposition and interpretation of Niebuhr's *theologia crucis* is carried out by means of six distinct, though interrelated perspectives: existential; evangelical; ethical; ecclesiological; ecumenical and eschatological. Despite his reluctance to present a full-blown dogmatics or systematics, I use these six perspectives to trace the contours of the coherent, yet largely, implicit *theologia crucis* that lies just below the surface of his corpus, so that my thesis may allow its form and content to crystallise more clearly in the mind's eye.

Beginning with an existential exploration of Niebuhr's phenomenology of faith in terms of trust and loyalty, we are enabled to more fully apprehend the multi-faceted faithlessness of the social self as exposed by the *theologia crucis*. In the next chapter, written from an evangelical perspective, we see how God in Christ has transformed the human situation by converting the various forms of faithlessness into that faithfulness which Niebuhr calls radical monotheism. Chapter three considers the ethical consequences of this faith-stance as depicted by Niebuhr in terms of response to the creative, governing and redemptive actions of God. Next, we analyse his ecclesiology, and see that this largely takes the form of a constructive critique in order to help clarify the mission of the *ecclesia crucis*. Chapters five and six are written from an ecumenical and eschatological perspective respectively, and seek to lay bare the kind of ethos that Niebuhr espoused, namely, that God's sovereignty is a mysterious yet

emergent reality with universal intent, confronting sin and suffering as an *eschatologia crucis*.

I conclude that Niebuhr's is a distinctive, even unique *theologia crucis*, one that is, at least plausible, and, I believe, persuasive as a particular kind of ethos of the cross. His interpretation of what I designate 'crucial faith' in the light of God in Christ makes his a necessary, if not in every respect, sufficient exposition of the orthodox Trinitarian gospel, perhaps best described as an *ethos* of the cross or a prophetic wisdom of the cross. As such it offers a distinct and worthy contribution to our understanding of Christian discipleship.

## Acknowledgements

I am glad of the opportunity to express my thanks to those people who have helped me in various ways throughout the research and completion of this thesis.

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My mother and father have shaped my life and vocation more than perhaps they imagine, and in thanking them for all sorts of things, I am also grateful for helping to advance this study by tracking down many obscure articles.

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# Introduction: A Sketch of Niebuhr's Life and Work

## 1. An Image of a Man

A photograph of H. Richard Niebuhr has long fascinated me. Taken in 1955 in the chapel of Yale Divinity School, it shows him standing at a lectern or podium looking down, presumably at those seated before him. The picture is in black and white with the dark shading of Niebuhr's gown and the sanctuary's background both lending an atmosphere of solemnity. But what arrests one's attention is Niebuhr's face: head tilted slightly to the side, his eyes gaze forward with profound intensity, suggestive of hidden depths of suffering and experience. His deeply lined face and forehead, a criss-cross of agonized concern; as well as the set of his closed mouth and jaw, subtly add to the overwhelming mood of existential contemplation that his expression evokes.

My contention is that a proper appreciation of this photograph goes hand in hand with the attempt to understand Niebuhr's distinctive contribution to the theological task, especially as this has been articulated in the well known expression, 'faith seeking understanding'. As this thesis has developed, I have become increasingly convinced that contemplating this photograph, as well as pondering his life in its historical context and reading closely his corpus of writings, involves a kind of hermeneutical spiral where each aspect helps interpret the others in a process of mutual enrichment.

James Gustafson, a close friend and colleague of Niebuhr's, seems to concur with this when he writes: 'Two photographs of HRN in my possession still affect me . . . Photographs convey dimensions that words do not.'<sup>1</sup> As Gustafson also writes, in confirmation of my earlier suggestion about the existentialist strain in Niebuhr's life and work: '[Niebuhr was] a person to whom the reality of God was not just an idea but a power, and whose

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<sup>1</sup> James M. Gustafson, 'Faithfulness: Remembering H. Richard Niebuhr,' *The Christian Century*, October 5, 1994, pp. 884-886, quoting from p. 886.

confidence that God could be Friend was borne out of both the Christian story and the struggles of personal, social and political life.<sup>2</sup>

Another friend and colleague, Liston Pope writes that ‘those who know him fairly well, including his students, are aware that his life has been etched in profound interior struggle, and that this life itself is a result of a simultaneous dependence on God and the rebellion of a human being against Him.’ And in a backward glance to the image evoked by the photograph I have already referred to, Pope remarks that ‘Richard Niebuhr on the podium is not acting but feeling – man feeling as he is thinking.’<sup>3</sup> Finally, we may record the reflections of another Niebuhr scholar, Mel Keiser who writes of how as a young theology student he one day ‘took down the *festschrift* for H. Richard Niebuhr, *Faith and Ethics*. Opening to the flyleaf picture, I was struck by his face. Deeply etched, luminous, manifest with power, humility and suffering, it was what I would come late to understand as the numinosity of “a wise old man.” In that fortuitous moment I was transfixed by a felt sense of deep meaning and mystery in the vital mind of this embodied self. Regaled with stories of his theological acumen by my undergraduate mentor and beginning to read *Christ and Culture*, I went to Yale Divinity School to study with Niebuhr in what turned out to be the last two years of his life.’<sup>4</sup>

Gustafson, Pope and Kliever were writing, of course, as North Americans, and indeed, most if not quite all of the scholarly interaction with Niebuhr has been in that context. Coming from my own rather different situation, namely, Northern Ireland and its circumstances of conflict, suspicion and terrorism, especially ‘the Troubles’ of recent years, I have been drawn to a deep appreciation of Niebuhr’s writings for particular reasons arising from this context, and am intrigued by the possibilities that may emerge from the sort of reinterpretation of his work that I offer here. It seems to me that Niebuhr’s distinctive interpretation of faith is a plausible, even persuasive theology of the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Liston Pope, ‘H. Richard Niebuhr: A Personal Appreciation,’ pp. 3-8, here pp. 4,5 in *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, Paul Ramsey ed, New York, Harper & Row, 1957, reprinted as Harper Torchbook paperback, 1965.

<sup>4</sup> R. Melvin Keiser, *Roots of Relational Ethics: Responsibility in Origin and Maturity in H. Richard Niebuhr*, Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1996, p. v.

cross (*theologia crucis*), offering insights into the good news of Jesus Christ, in terms of trust and loyalty and responsibility, which are quite literally 'crucial'. The word *crucial* is used here with deliberate double intent. In normal usage it refers to something which is necessary, vital or essential to the being or well-being of an entity or event. This normal or 'common-sense' meaning of the word *crucial* is part of what I want to convey in my thesis title since it makes explicit my conviction that Niebuhr's work on faith as involving aspects of trust, loyalty and responsibility is a necessary part of understanding the true nature of the Christian gospel and its imperatives. But the word *crucial* as I use it here is also meant to refer to the fact that such faith is inescapably dependent on the good news of God's grace as demonstrated and declared in the life, ministry, resurrection, ascension and awaited return of Jesus, the *crucified* Christ. Niebuhr's theological and ethical work on these and other related matters are thus to be analysed and interpreted in this thesis under the guiding rubric of *crucial faith* as suggested by this two-fold meaning of the term.

In fact, if one were to look for a suitable descriptive term for my interpretation of Niebuhr's work it could well be argued that his *theologia crucis* is perhaps primarily an 'ethos of the cross'. The advantage of this phrase is that it indicates the several interlocking dimensions that Niebuhr was keen to hold together in his synoptic understanding of the Christ event: not simply or solely a dogmatic depiction of God's being and action; nor simply or solely a highly detailed casuistic ethics of Christian behaviour; but rather a body of work that sought to explore the borderlands where biblical studies, systematic theology, philosophy and ethics all converged. For Niebuhr, as I will argue throughout this thesis, the primary point of convergence is what Douglas Hall, quoting Karl Barth, has called 'the environs of Golgotha'.<sup>5</sup> In some such sense is Niebuhr's *theologia crucis* thus presented as an *ethos* of the cross of Jesus Christ. As the thesis title suggests, 'crucial faith' necessarily emphasises *both* that Jesus was 'crucified' *and* 'raised from death' thus determining and defining the entire ethos of the Christian life and thus enhancing our understanding of what the church means by discipleship.

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<sup>5</sup> Douglas John Hall, *Christian Theology in a North American Context: Vol. 2: Professing the Faith*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1996, p. 520.

## 2. Reading Between the Lines: Life and Text in Context

Helmut Richard Niebuhr was born in 1894 in Wright City, Missouri, U.S.A. where his father, a German immigrant, was a distinguished pastor in the German Evangelical Synod. The denomination was numerically small and was still more rooted in its European Lutheran-Calvinist heritage than it was as yet willing to enter fully into its New World setting.<sup>6</sup> A parable of things yet to come was that in his early years, Niebuhr was primarily called Helmut, but with the passage of time, and particularly with the profound challenges to his ethnic consciousness wrought by the First World War, he later changed his main name to the more 'Americanised' one of Richard. Nonetheless, the ecclesiastical ethos in which the young Niebuhr was nurtured continued to deeply influence the content and temper of his future theological life's work.<sup>7</sup>

Helmut Richard Niebuhr followed his father, Gustav, and one of his elder brothers, Reinhold, into the ordained ministry of the German Evangelical Synod. Like both of them, he was part of the more 'progressive' wing of the denomination, and this restless frustration with the denomination's prevailing 'conservative' ethos sometimes sat rather uneasily with the education he received in two of its teaching establishments, first at Elmhurst College (1908-1912), and then, from 1912-1915 at Eden Theological Seminary.

However, certain unforeseen circumstances were to have profound consequences upon the course of Niebuhr's life and also probably served to shape the spirit as well as the substance of his future calling. In 1913, during Niebuhr's time at Eden, his father died suddenly and unexpectedly, prompting the family to move back to Lincoln, Illinois where Gustav had previously been

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<sup>6</sup> William G Chrystal, *A Father's Mantle: The Legacy of Gustav Niebuhr*, New York, Pilgrim Press, 1982; 'A Man of the Hour and the Time: The Legacy of Gustav Niebuhr,' *Church History* 49, 1980, pp. 416-432.

<sup>7</sup> Jon Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World*, Georgia, Mercer University Press, 1986. This book offers the most extensive insights into the context of Niebuhr's life and work.

a pastor. After his studies at Eden had ended, Niebuhr helped support his mother and family financially by working for a year in 1915-16 as a reporter in a local newspaper, during which time he took serious stock of the direction of his life.<sup>8</sup>

By 1916, Niebuhr had reached some kind of resolution on the matter, and was ordained and called to serve as pastor of Walnut Park Evangelical Church in St. Louis. One incident, in particular, from his ministry there, stands out in shocking detail as a test of his faith in the face of extremity. Niebuhr was helping to lead a winter outing of the congregation's scout troop. At Creve Coeur Lake, three boys let curiosity overcome caution when they became aware of a fish splashing in a hole on the frozen surface. Drawn by the spectacle, they ventured onto thin ice which gave way below them. Niebuhr frantically tried to save them, injuring himself in the process, but sadly all three boys died and were buried a few days later by their distraught pastor.<sup>9</sup> Echoing Diefenthaler's sentiments on the same incident, Fowler writes: 'The memory of that tragedy and his sense of responsibility for it may have contributed to his lifelong sensitivity to the presence and power of inexplicable evil in life, and to the suffering of innocents.'<sup>10</sup>

Niebuhr still felt the pull of academia strongly, and, perhaps not surprisingly, as a pastor with a passion for education, he returned to his old seminary, Eden, to lecture in theology and ethics from 1919 to 1922, during which time he also enrolled in numerous supplementary courses in an attempt to extend his knowledge and, at least partially satisfy his love of learning. 'Academic vagabondage' was how his brother Reinhold described these years. Niebuhr's educational appetite, however, was only whetted by these experiences, and so he decided to further deepen and broaden his intellectual interests at Yale University. His studies there culminated in his 1924 doctoral dissertation entitled 'Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion', giving evidence

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<sup>8</sup> James W Fowler, *To See the Kingdom: The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1974. Reprinted by University Press of America, Lanham, MD, 1985, p. 2. All future references to Fowler's book are from this latter version.

<sup>9</sup> Diefenthaler, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> Fowler, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

of his lifelong fascination with how theology, philosophy, ethics, history and sociology are all interwoven into diverse and intricate, yet potentially unified patterns. At the same time Niebuhr continued to work as the pastor of a small local congregation and was now a husband to Florence, and father to their two children, Cynthia and Richard.

The Yale faculty were keen to have someone of Niebuhr's calibre on their staff, especially as he had given proof of his capabilities, not just through his research, but also because of his proven excellence as a lecturer in several theological disciplines. But instead, in 1924, aged thirty, Niebuhr accepted an invitation to become president of Elmhurst College, and for the next three years he laboured with great energy and imagination in the busy demands of overseeing the plethora of administrative duties that helped Elmhurst receive full accreditation and develop into becoming a first-rate liberal arts college. However, Niebuhr's first love, that of theological education, perennially present in the background, began to reassert itself, and this, together with the strains of administration, led to him leaving the presidency at Elmhurst, and return to the faculty at Eden Theological Seminary in 1927.

Niebuhr had been nurtured in a church background that might, with some caution, be called 'liberal evangelical', an ethos in which the experiential aspects of the gospel were at least as important as its doctrinal bases. But perhaps, above all, it was the ethical consequences of faith which were of paramount importance in his attempts to reflect upon the Christian message. These interests were soon to find public expression in a series of articles in various theological journals<sup>11</sup> culminating in the publication in 1929 of his first book, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. This was a prophetic critique of how churches tended to mirror the many divisions already existing within society. In a trenchant denunciation of ecclesiastical faithlessness he accused the churches of reflecting and even reinforcing the caste system of society at

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<sup>11</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, hereafter cited as HRN, 'What Holds Churches Together?', *The Christian Century*, 43, 1926, pp. 346-348; 'The Relativities of Religion,' *The Christian Century*, 45, 1928, pp. 1456-1458; 'Churches That Might Unite,' *The Christian Century*, 46, 1929, pp. 259-261; 'Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic,' New York, International Missionary Council, 1929, pp. 3-11.

large. In a summary critique he even went so far as to state that 'Denominationalism thus represents the moral failure of Christianity'.<sup>12</sup>

However, even as the ink was drying on Niebuhr's manuscript, he began to feel a sense of unease with some of his strictures against corrupt church structures. He now came to realise that whilst there was indeed a place for the kind of liberal indignation in which he had hitherto been engaged, there was an even greater need to provide a constructive alternative which, still more fundamentally, should draw upon the central and classical truths of the Church's gospel. An eight-month sabbatical from Eden in 1930, gave some 'space' for Niebuhr to contemplate these stirrings, and also enabled him to experience at first hand, some of the seismic movements and events that were taking place in Europe. In his encounters with many of the leading intellectuals in Germany and Russia he gained a wealth of insight upon which his fertile mind was able to reflect. In particular, he found great stimulus in meeting the proponents of the various German theological schools, as well as some of the main representatives of Marxism.

On returning to North America from this sabbatical, Niebuhr was approached about a possible move to the faculty at Yale Divinity School as associate professor of Christian Ethics. Initially he declined the request, but Yale were persistent in their pursuit of his services, and so, in the summer of 1931, he and his family made the move eastwards in time for him to settle into his new role for the fall semester. In the stimulating yet intellectually demanding environment of Yale, Niebuhr made an immediate and favourable impression. His Alumni Lecture at the commencement of the first term gave an indication of where some of his primary interests lay in that he attempted to conduct a rigorous dialogue between some of the main contemporary theological insights from both Germany and North America in the hope of identifying and articulating 'a third way' which would draw on the respective

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<sup>12</sup> HRN, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, New York, Henry Holt and Co., 1929. Reprinted by Peter Smith, Gloucester, Mass., 1987, p. 25.

strengths of each tradition.<sup>13</sup> Implicit in this lecture is the kind of methodological procedure that we will see throughout this thesis as being typically 'Niebuhrian', namely, his preference for working within, or keeping in dialogue, two or more distinct positions. Niebuhr gave this procedure the label 'polar analysis' and it is akin to the more commonly used term of 'dialectical' often found in theological or philosophical discourse.

During the course of the next few years, Niebuhr's 'reading' of the various crises in the national and international scenes prompted him to re-evaluate much that he had previously taken for granted. His liberal instincts did not desert him in that he continued to be fascinated by the question of how the Church ought to minister effectively and relevantly in the wider world, but he was, increasingly now, a chastened liberal, able to see that the old-style social gospel of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, was inadequate for the trying task to which the Church was called. The insights of what he now began to call the 'Great Tradition' in theology, such as Edwards, Pascal, Luther, Calvin, Thomas and Augustine became more important to him, as did the 'dialectical theology' exemplified above all by Karl Barth; all of which helped Niebuhr to formulate a powerful and timely series of suitable responses to such distressing events as 'The Great Depression' and the growing political unrest in Europe. To his mind, the Church ought to be able to offer something much more profound, not to say righteous, than the prevailing ethos of 'Culture Protestantism' which for too long had only exacerbated the problems which the Protestant churches had been called to address and transform.<sup>14</sup>

Several writings from these years in the early and mid 1930's are worthy of mention, but perhaps the two that are most indicative of major new landmarks in the evolution of his thought are the 1932 piece entitled *The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus* which Niebuhr prepared for and read to the New York Theological Society, but which was never published until years after his death;

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<sup>13</sup> HRN, 'Can German and American Christians Understand Each Other?' *The Christian Century* 47, 1930, pp. 914-916.

<sup>14</sup> HRN, 'Reformation: Continuing Imperative,' *The Christian Century*, 77, (1960), pp. 248-251, esp. p. 249.



and his 1935 collaborative enterprise culminating in the book, *The Church Against the World* co-authored with Wilhelm Pauck and Francis P. Miller.<sup>15</sup> In these and other writings from the time, Niebuhr began to understand Jesus as primarily an 'apocalyptic revolutionary strategist' whose cosmic claims were so radically different from the prevailing status quo as to almost warrant a revolution of society rather than an easy-going accommodation or endorsement of its mores and concerns. Although he would later state his discomfiture with the comparison, and was at pains to open up considerable space between the two of them, there is little doubt that Niebuhr was deeply influenced by the profound reverberations which Barth's theology had set up after his stunning commentary on Romans, and then continued to articulate with such authoritative verve thereafter.

As the decade unfolded, Niebuhr continued to immerse himself more consciously and conscientiously than ever before in the great writings of the Christian tradition, simultaneously deepening his knowledge of, and appreciation for, the history of American Christianity in the preceding three centuries. The major fruit of this latter labour was his 1937 book, *The Kingdom of God in America*<sup>16</sup> which quickly drew the admiring attention of theologians, historians and sociologists and has long since been acknowledged as a profound yet accessible summary of North American church life in terms of its shaping beliefs and practices. The insights of the seventeenth century Puritans and their emphasis on the sovereignty of God; the eighteenth century Evangelicals and their focus on the kingdom of Christ; as well as the nineteenth century Social Gospellers with their overriding concern for the coming kingdom of God were all creatively but not uncritically re-appropriated. Many Niebuhr scholars, notably James Fowler, have seen in this book, and the reflections which Niebuhr was busy interpreting and articulating at this time, the coming together of all or most of the main convictions which he was to hold, even if he was to express these in various distinct ways in the shifting circumstances of the

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<sup>15</sup> HRN, Wilhelm Pauck and Francis P. Miller, *The Church Against the World*, Chicago, Willett, Clark & Co., 1935.

<sup>16</sup> HRN, *The Kingdom of God in America*, New York, Harper and Row, Torchbooks, 1937. Reprinted 1959. Reprinted Middletown, Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press, 1988.

ensuing years.<sup>17</sup> This was also the work in which Niebuhr described American liberal religiosity in what is, perhaps, the most oft-quoted sentence of his career. 'A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.'<sup>18</sup>

Niebuhr's next major essay was his 1941 book *The Meaning of Revelation*<sup>19</sup> in which he tried to articulate a third way by which the distinctive, or perhaps more accurately, divergent, perspectives of Ernst Troeltsch and Karl Barth might be brought into some kind of tolerable or even helpful tension. Whilst acknowledging the difficulty of doing so, Niebuhr felt that somehow the contextual relativity of Troeltsch's methodology could and should be brought into genuine engagement with Barth's Christologically-determined theocentric approach. This 'double wrestle' might seem to many observers to have demanded too much of Niebuhr but for others it provided hope that two such opposing methodologies, even from within the ranks of modern Protestant theology, could at least be brought into some sort of meaningful dialogue. At this stage, Niebuhr was content to call his methodological approach that of 'historical relativism' or 'theocentric relativism' but he later came to regret the label 'relativism' and later spoke of 'historical relationism' in an attempt to put some distance between his position and the charge of his critics who felt that he was in danger of falling into an untenable form of 'subjectivism'.<sup>20</sup>

The years that followed the publication of *The Meaning of Revelation* were difficult ones for Niebuhr. In fact, a combination of factors led to him being hospitalised in 1944 suffering from exhaustion and depression. A sensitive man, he felt with great existential depth the horrors of the second world war; the coinciding of his own fiftieth birthday with the earlier death at the same age of his father; and the breakdown of his handicapped daughter's troubled marriage.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Fowler, op cit., pp. 253ff.

<sup>18</sup> HRN, *The Kingdom of God in America*, op. cit., p. 193.

<sup>19</sup> HRN, *The Meaning of Revelation*, New York, Macmillan Publishing Co., 1941. Reprinted in paperback in 1960.

<sup>20</sup> See HRN, 'Reformation: Continuing Imperative,' op. cit., p. 249.

<sup>21</sup> Diefenthaler, op. cit., p. 56.

However, one lasting legacy of this difficult period in Niebuhr's life is that it became the occasion for a profound series of articles in which he reflected with penetrating and poignant insight upon the 'crucifying' but ultimately 'redemptive' events and experiences which God was making people confront but also helping them through.<sup>22</sup> The hermeneutical key or interpretive lens here for Niebuhr was the grace and righteousness of God demonstrated in the cross of Jesus Christ, which in the face of human suffering and sin worked its transforming effect through such powerful weakness and foolish wisdom. A nascent *theologia crucis*, very much akin to Paul, Luther, and other more recent theologians, is apparent here, and is central to my thesis.

In the post-war era, Niebuhr, who, as we have seen, was always fascinated by the diverse ways in which the churches related to their surrounding society, brought the research and teaching materials from his work at Yale, more explicitly into the public domain. His 1951 book *Christ and Culture* presented a five-fold typology in which Christ was interpreted as being 'against'; 'of'; 'above'; 'in paradox with'; and 'the transformer or converter of' culture. Niebuhr's actual assessment of some historical figures within each paradigm has been questioned, and recently his whole enterprise in this book has come in for some heavy criticism. Some of these criticisms will be addressed later on in this thesis.

In 1954 to 1956 Niebuhr was made Director of an American Association of Theological Schools study of theological education in the United States and Canada. Several publications came out of this team effort but the most influential was undoubtedly Niebuhr's own 1956 essay *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*.<sup>23</sup> In this, he highlighted, in particular, the distortions and perversions introduced into church life by 'confusing proximate with

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<sup>22</sup> See esp. 'The Christian Church in the World's Crisis,' *Christianity and Crisis* 6, 1941, pp. 11-17; 'I Believe in the Kingdom of God,' *Youth* 4, 1941, pp. 3-4; 'War as the Judgement of God,' *The Christian Century* 59, 1942, pp. 630-633; 'Is God in the War?' *The Christian Century*, 59, 1942, pp. 953-955; 'War as Crucifixion,' *The Christian Century* 60, 1943, pp. 513-515.

<sup>23</sup> HRN, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, New York, Harper and Row, 1956. See also HRN and D. D. Williams, eds., *The Ministry in Historical Perspectives*, New York, Harper and Bros., 1956; HRN, D. D. Williams and J. M. Gustafson, eds., *The Advancement of Theological Education*, New York, Harper and Bros., 1957.

ultimate goals'. In a passage programmatic to both his book, and also to my thesis, he wrote:

'Denominationalism not the denominations; ecclesiasticism not the churches; Biblicism not the Bible; Christism not Jesus Christ; these represent the chief present perversions and confusions in Church and theology. There are many other less deceptive, cruder substitutions of the proximate for the ultimate. But the ones described above seem to set the great problems to faith and theology in our time. In them the need for a constant process of *a radically monotheistic reformation* comes to appearance.'<sup>24</sup> If and when the Church does undergo this reformation then, says Niebuhr, it becomes more faithful to its true goal, which he defines, in light of the life and teaching of Jesus, as 'the increase among men of the love of God and neighbor'.<sup>25</sup>

Embedded in these reflections about the nature and purpose of the Church and its ministry, are also some of Niebuhr's deepest convictions about the practice of theological education. For him, theology in its broad sense is not so much 'a particularist discipline' in terms of a highly doctrinal or technical approach, rather it is 'the search for human wisdom about the wisdom of God in the creation and redemption of man'<sup>26</sup> in which the inter-relations between knowledge of God, self and our other human companions finds its definitive demonstration in Jesus Christ. Niebuhr would thus seem to view the theological task more in terms of 'sapientia' than 'scientia'. The contrast, or distinction, or at least relative weight of emphasis here between Niebuhr, and say Barth, may be worth further exploration.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> HRN, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, op. cit., p. 46. Italics mine for emphasis.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 105, 113.

<sup>27</sup> See George Hunsinger, personal correspondence with myself, 12 October 2001; Douglas John Hall, personal correspondence with myself, 7 March 2003. In brief, Hunsinger's model for theology leans more towards 'scientia' and Hall tends more to a notion of 'sapientia'. For a not dissimilar exchange of views on vocational preference or emphasis in the area of constructive theology see John B. Webster, 'Article Review of David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*,' *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 54, 4 (2001), pp. 548-559 and David F. Ford, 'Salvation and the Nature of Theology: A Response to John Webster's Review of *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*,' *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 54, 4 (2001), pp. 560-575.

Niebuhr always considered the reformation of the Church as his own most important calling.<sup>28</sup> He was convinced that this required of certain people, including himself, that they attempt to minister to the Church, and thus, through the Church, to the wider world, by means of the search for a better theology. Niebuhr believed that this was to be the complementary task of many different thinkers, and so within the field of theology he consciously staked out his own concerns and charted a distinct, even unique, course. In particular, throughout the 1950's, as a perennial project, he carried out a programme of research and teaching whose main focus was the subject of human faith. He intended his reflections to come out in written form as a large manuscript called *Faith on Earth: Essays on Human Confidence and Loyalty*, but much of this material, dealing with the phenomenological study of faith was rejected by the potential publisher, and so only part of his work on faith came out in 1960 under the title *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*.<sup>29</sup> The rejected parts of the overall manuscript were only published in 1989, nearly thirty years after their originally intended date, so, at long last, letting the theological world gain a better grasp of what Niebuhr was working on in his faith explorations of the 1950's.<sup>30</sup>

According to Niebuhr, it seems to be a general, perhaps even universal phenomenon that people live by faith. Faith may be defined as our relating to one or more objective realities which we believe to be trustworthy value centres and worthwhile common causes. Later on in this thesis we shall explore Niebuhr's profound distinctions between the three main types of faith that he identifies: namely, the two false forms of faith called polytheism and henotheism, and also, that true form of faith, radical monotheism, which Jesus Christ incarnates and mediates. As well as this, we shall consider Niebuhr's acute analysis of how human faithfulness often turns into faithlessness, expressed variously as fear, anger and evasion in relation to God.

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<sup>28</sup> HRN, *Reformation: Continuing Imperative*, op. cit., pp. 249, 250, 251.

<sup>29</sup> HRN, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture with Supplementary Essays*, New York, Harper and Row, 1960.

<sup>30</sup> HRN, *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith*, ed., Richard R. Niebuhr, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989.

For most of his working life, Niebuhr was a professor of Christian Ethics in the Divinity School of Yale University. Over the years his distinctive approach in this field was sharpened and clarified through research and lecturing. Niebuhr's penchant for articulating 'a third way' between other prevailing options also becomes apparent when we consider his procedure for the study of ethics through the use of 'root metaphors' or 'symbolic forms'. The two main types of ethics understood the human person either in terms of what Niebuhr called 'man-the-maker' whose 'teleological' disposition was to strive to achieve what he thought was a 'good' future goal; or 'man-the-citizen', who apprehended life primarily in terms of the law or obligation which ought to be obeyed so as to do what was 'right' on the basis of powers or authorities whose past eminence was to be accepted rather than questioned or challenged.

Whilst not denying the usefulness of both of these types of ethics, Niebuhr felt that both of them contained certain limitations, inconsistencies and even contradictions. Furthermore, there was a disturbing tendency for polarisation in societies in which no genuine agreement could be found for whether future goals or existing laws were more important, let alone which goals and which laws could or should have precedence. Niebuhr's proposal was to introduce a third root metaphor, 'man-the-responder' who existed as a personal agent living in the midst of a force-field of other agents or powers which impinged upon him, and to which he was inescapably called to respond. His conviction was that in and through and beyond all the limited, finite, and often conflicting actions which were happening to the person in question, there was the being and action of God, calling for the human agent to discern what was happening and thus to do what was 'fitting' in response to the divine pattern of meaning in that context. As Niebuhr put it in a summary statement:

'The idea or pattern of responsibility, then, may summarily and abstractly be defined as 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; and all of this in a continuing community of agents'.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> HRN, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*, New York, Harper and Row, 1963. Republished in 1978, p. 65.

Sadly, Niebuhr died on the 5<sup>th</sup> July 1962, less than a year before he was due to retire from full-time teaching in Yale. It is believed that he was just about to begin bringing together his many years of research, reflections and lecture notes on Christian Ethics into an orderly form fit for eventual publication. However, he died before this major job of planning and appraisal had begun. What did emerge in book form posthumously in 1963 was a sort of ethical prolegomena, *The Responsible Self* based upon the principles that Niebuhr had long been teaching. Unfortunately, useful as this is in some ways in exploring the concept and place of responsibility in moral discourse, it does not include the substantive material content that Niebuhr had lectured on for years in Yale. However, some compensation has come for those engaged in research on Niebuhr in the form of transcribed 'lecture notes'<sup>32</sup> taken by various students who attended his classes. Whilst obviously not in the final polished form that was typical of Niebuhr's publications, these lecture notes do give us a real flavour of Niebuhr at work at the lectern, and, arguably, more importantly, give us much crucial material in terms of what he understands by the imperatives involved in human beings responding to God's creative, governing and redemptive actions.

Another posthumous Niebuhr book, entitled *Theology, History and Culture*<sup>33</sup> was published in 1996. This was a kind of 'gather up exercise' which brought into the public domain some of his major addresses, lectures and sermons. Whilst they are fascinating in their own right, and help to illuminate, clarify or confirm certain features of Niebuhr's existing work, they do not seem to contradict in any significant way the insights he expounded in his earlier writings. He does, however, give quite strong hints that where he to be allowed to begin his theological career again, he would wish to follow more in some of Jonathan Edwards's footsteps, and explore the realm of the emotions, perhaps

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<sup>32</sup> HRN, *Christian Ethics Lecture Notes*, transcribed in Spring 1952 by Robert Yetter, Gene Canestrari, and Ed Elliot, typed and mimeographed 182 pages; Mel Keiser, 1961, handwritten; Elizabeth Keiser, 1961, handwritten. Most of my citations later on in the thesis will come from the typed 1952 lectures since the handwritten ones from 1961 are more difficult to read and thus quote accurately.

<sup>33</sup> HRN, *Theology, History and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, edited by William Stacy Johnson, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1996.

because he felt that Barth, the towering theological figure during Niebuhr's career, had neglected or sidelined such notions.<sup>34</sup>

### 3. A Strange Tradition: 'Theologia Crucis'

A central conviction of this thesis is that Niebuhr's life's work is a particularly interesting, innovative, and indeed, unique example of what sometimes goes by the name of *theologia crucis*, or in its English equivalent, the 'theology of the cross.' As one modern exponent of this tradition puts it: 'Contrary to the way in which the term is frequently heard in the English-speaking world, the "theology of the cross" is not a synonym for the doctrine of the atonement. It designates rather a whole theological and faith posture.'<sup>35</sup> In similar vein, Jurgen Moltmann writes that it 'is not a single chapter in theology, but the key-signature for all Christian theology.'<sup>36</sup>

The pervasive thrust of the tradition called *theologia crucis* is to construe 'God's abiding commitment to the world'<sup>37</sup> by a persistent focus on the unique locus where God's loving concern for his creation is decisively made known, the cross of Jesus Christ. A marked feature of this tradition is to rid theology of the perennial temptation to fall into the many and varied expressions of 'triumphalism' or *theologia gloriae*. These tend to distort the gospel by their inability to probe the negativities encountered and exposed by the *theologia crucis*. The result, too often, is a shallow message or pseudo-gospel of what

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 48. For more on Niebuhr's compatibility to, or kinship with, Edwards, see Leo Sandon, Jr., 'Jonathan Edwards and H. Richard Niebuhr,' *Religious Studies*, 12 (1976) pp. 101-115; Gerald P. McKenny, 'God the Center: Moral Objectivity in Jonathan Edwards and H. Richard Niebuhr,' Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Chicago, 1989. A detailed comparison of Edwards and Niebuhr is beyond the scope of this thesis but would appear to open up some promising lines of research for others to pursue.

<sup>35</sup> Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context*, (Volume 1), Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 1989, p. 24.

<sup>36</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. W. Wilson and John Bowden, London: SCM, 1973, p. 72. See also Ernst Kasemann, 'The Pauline Theology of the Cross,' in *Interpretation*, Vol. 24, No. 2, April, 1970, p. 227.

<sup>37</sup> Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, op. cit, p. 25. The italics are Hall's for emphasis.



Bonhoeffer called 'cheap grace', failing to do justice to the pathos and profundity of the really radical, indeed, scandalous nature of what God has done by means of the crucified Christ.<sup>38</sup> The rich mystery of this saving but strange event has issued in a tradition of interpretation that we are here calling *theologia crucis*, whose representatives all display a similar sort of discerning spirit, if not an exact exposition of content in their reflections on what is at stake. In rough chronological terms, this tradition has as some of its chief modern exponents Douglas John Hall, Alan Lewis, Jurgen Moltmann, Eberhard Jungel, and Ernst Kasemann to name but a few. It stretches back through Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, P.T. Forsyth, Martin Kahler, Soren Kierkegaard, Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf and others to the Reformation era, particularly the work of Martin Luther.<sup>39</sup> Luther, in turn, had his understanding of the matter decisively shaped by some of the medieval mystics, and more particularly, through his Augustinian heritage, the writings of the apostle Paul.<sup>40</sup> Further back still, the same tradition has some of its most important roots in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament, a diverse body of literature which reflects with profound insight upon the pathos of God's covenant relationship with Israel, a history often marked by extreme and excruciating experiences.<sup>41</sup>

It is my strong conviction that the work of H. Richard Niebuhr belongs within this same tradition of *theologia crucis*, as does that of his brother Reinhold.<sup>42</sup> Both of them had a sensitive grasp of, and feel for, the peculiar spirit that marked that strange hermeneutic of the crucified Jesus Christ found in both Paul the apostle and Luther the reformer. Niebuhr emerges, I shall

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<sup>38</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, London, SCM Press, 1964, p. 35.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Walter von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, Belfast, Christian Journals, 1976; Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1984.

<sup>40</sup> Graham Tomlin, *The Power of the Cross: Theology and the Death of Christ in Paul, Luther and Pascal*, Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 1999. The question of 'power' and its abuse is a major part of Tomlin's excellent interpretation. This theme, a crucial aspect of the particular genius of the *theologia crucis*, will be seen as a pervasive element in Niebuhr's work too.

<sup>41</sup> Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, New York, HarperCollins, 2001. The bibliography will give much more extensive references to the relevant works of some of the thinkers cited in this tradition of *theologia crucis*. Some of them will be quoted at various places within the unfolding argument of this thesis.

<sup>42</sup> For keen insights into Reinhold's *theologia crucis* in particular, see Douglas John Hall, 'The Cross and Contemporary Culture,' in Richard Harries, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of our Time*, Oxford, Mowbray, 1986, pp.183-204.

argue, as a faithful yet innovative exemplar of this tradition, whose legacy to the ongoing work of Christian theology and ethics holds considerable and perhaps as yet, untapped potential. The various perspectives through which we shall study this legacy should help to show more clearly the ways in which his distinctive themes of 'radical monotheism' and 'responsibility' are, in fact, vital demonstrations of what we shall call 'crucial faith': that is, a true and necessary understanding of the so-called *theologia crucis*.

It must be said, however, that this tradition, has always been, and continues to be, a strangely neglected and misunderstood one, even within the Christian household of faith where it is meant to belong. As Rowan Williams writes: 'It is the intractable *strangeness* of the ground of belief that must constantly be allowed to challenge the fixed assumptions of religiosity; it is a *given*, whose question to each succeeding age is fundamentally one and the same.'<sup>43</sup> The *theologia crucis*, which is not just a theology but also its attendant ethics and spirituality too, well knows, that the 'final control and measure and irritant in Christian speech remains the cross: the execution of Jesus of Nazareth.'<sup>44</sup> In Luther's lapidary statement: *crux probat omnia*: 'all things are to be measured by the cross of Christ alone', a motif that Niebuhr continuously explores, and rarely, if ever, leaves, throughout the length and breadth of his life's work. However to really appreciate Niebuhr's *theologia crucis* it will be necessary to quote him extensively, since the style of his prose, almost as much as its substance, is a crucial aspect of the whole that he seeks to communicate. As is also the case with Barth, to dissect such writing too much into its constituent parts is to diminish or even distort its distinctive dynamic. Niebuhr once spoke of his theological reflections as being 'these verbal gestures in the direction of a truth that lies beyond my powers of thought and expression.'<sup>45</sup> This is entirely in keeping with the modesty of a genuine *theologia crucis* which knows full well the broken and fragmentary nature of all human reason, and whose spirit is therefore that of a crucified mind, not a crusading mind.

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<sup>43</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross*, London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> HRN, *The Kingdom of God in America*, op. cit., p. xxvii.

#### 4. An Overview of this Thesis

There has been some debate as to just how systematic Niebuhr's work is given the highly existential nature of his reflections and writings.<sup>46</sup> This has been exacerbated by the fact that Niebuhr's main teaching course, Christian ethics, remained only in manuscript form, and was to have been extensively revised for eventual publication in his retirement. As we noted earlier in this introduction, Niebuhr died suddenly and unexpectedly, and thus his major 'system' of thought never reached the wider intellectual public beyond his own students and close colleagues. If we were to make our judgement about the systematic extent of Niebuhr's work solely on the basis of his published books and articles, then such doubts would appear well founded. But if and when one takes into careful consideration the importance which Niebuhr had perennially attached to his three-fold analysis of Christian ethics as response to God's creative, governing and redemptive actions, then there is much less doubt as to the coherence of his 'system' and to the effectiveness of his ability to 'get it all together' in a unified and internally consistent manner.

The outline of my thesis will therefore attempt to make rather more explicit this 'systematic' or 'coherent' or 'consistently constructive' nature of Niebuhr's work than perhaps has been the case in other studies.<sup>47</sup> Following as it does, most of the major doctrinal loci of classical Protestant theologies, this project is, I believe, less an attempt to force Niebuhr's work into a Procrustean bed, and more an attempt to see if his prominent and pervasive themes of 'radical monotheism' and 'responsibility', as aspects of the *theologia crucis*, have the sort of systematic coherence and practical applicability that prove to be, at least plausible, or perhaps even persuasive. The loci of this doctrinal scheme may thus be thought of as a series of ways in which Niebuhr's work can be

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<sup>46</sup> Fowler, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

<sup>47</sup> Perhaps the works that are most akin to my project are John D. Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr*, Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott, 1970; James W. Fowler, *To See the Kingdom: The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1974; and Jerry A. Irish, *The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr*, Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1983, but none of them proposes the *theologia crucis* as their guiding motif or rubric.

questioned and quarried to test whether it might yield something, which in its faithfulness to the good news of Jesus Christ, is found to be fruitful for others to pursue as well. Amongst recent or contemporary projects, this thesis on Niebuhr has perhaps its closest affinities with Douglas John Hall's three-volume systematics, which attempts to present Christian theology in a North American context.<sup>48</sup>

In chapter one of this thesis we will consider Niebuhr's distinctive interpretation of the Christian life and message, or as he called it 'radical monotheism' from an *existential* perspective. This reflects the normal strategy that he employed in his writings where the initial focus of his attention was on the existential situation of the human self as embedded in a particular social situation with all its attendant dynamics and demands. Niebuhr coined the word, 'pistology', derived from the Greek New Testament word 'pistis' meaning 'faith', to indicate that his field of study here was the analysis of the faith structure of the human being as a social self. As social selves we are inescapably involved in numerous interpersonal interactions with other social selves. In this web of mutuality we relate to the 'other' in terms of tacit covenants based on trust and loyalty. An empirical assessment, however, reveals that the faithfulness that God intends, and we aspire to, is distorted into patterns of wrong relationship or faithlessness. We will explore Niebuhr's acute analysis of this fallen human condition in which issues of epistemology and anthropology are prominent, and take careful note of how he movingly renders this existential situation with great experiential power. Included in this chapter will be an analysis of Niebuhr's concept of sin.

In chapter two, the *evangelical* turning point becomes the focus of attention. The procedure followed in this perspective reflects Niebuhr's own methodology in that the issue of soteriology is given relatively greater precedence over Christology. In other words, the 'work' of God in Jesus Christ is treated at

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<sup>48</sup> Douglas John Hall, *Volume 1: Thinking the Faith*, Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, 1989; *Volume 2: Professing the Faith*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1996; *Volume 3: Confessing the Faith*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1998. There are also close affinities, I believe, with, for example Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2001; Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, op. cit., London, SCM Press, 1992, though the latter two works are more explicitly Trinitarian than Niebuhr's.

much greater depth than are questions of the identity or ontology of his 'person'. The latter questions are not entirely neglected, but unlike certain other theologians for whom they loomed large, Niebuhr concentrated his energies more on understanding and articulating the fact that Jesus is the 'mediator' who reforms or transforms our ambiguous faithlessness into faithfulness once more. Since Niebuhr's theological work did not normally evince the sort of self-consciously doctrinal or technical mode of other practitioners in the same field, but nonetheless has things of interest and significance to say regarding core subjects such as soteriology, Christology and Theology (as the doctrine of God proper), it is all the more important to assess what he does offer in these crucial loci. What emerges is a particular *theologia crucis*, here understood as a distinctive contribution to expounding God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ.<sup>49</sup>

In chapter three, we will offer an interpretation of the *ethical* perspective in Niebuhr's work on responsibility, a concept that is based on, and the counterpart of, the theology of radical monotheism previously considered. In fact, Niebuhr's teaching career was predominantly in the field of Christian ethics, and here, in keeping with an already recognized characteristic of his work in theology, he seeks to explore or pursue 'a third way' in distinction from two other prevailing ethical types, namely deontological and teleological, with their emphasis on laws and ends respectively. Niebuhr argues for, and articulates his own preferred 'root metaphor' called the 'ethics of response' or 'responsibility', in which we are called to be responsible to God for the world in terms of what we interpret to be the 'fitting' action in any given situation. This is far from being an abstract 'situation ethics' in which a generalized notion of 'love' or where contextual expediency has pride of place. Instead, our response as human agents is shaped by God's prior and sovereign action in creating, governing and redeeming, and these are not thought of as separate, successive or antagonistic, but rather having a perichoretic pattern. The human being as a 'social self' may thus also be understood as a 'responsible self'. In a Christian context this may also allow us to designate the human creature as a 'Christo-morphic' being, in which Jesus Christ is the pioneer and mediator of

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<sup>49</sup> HRN, *The Responsible Self*, op. cit., pp. 43-44 where Niebuhr says that such reconciliation through Jesus Christ is the 'key' issue in human existence.

faithful response to God's differentiated actions upon the self, in and for the world.

In chapter four, Niebuhr's radical monotheism is considered from an *ecclesiological* perspective, an especially important theme for him since he felt that his main calling in life was to contribute theologically to the well being of the Church. Numerous articles flowed from his pen over the years on this particular subject, as well as the three-year project which culminated in the publication of his widely acclaimed book, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*. For Niebuhr, the Church was that community of faith which centred on Jesus Christ and which was continually being called, equipped and reformed so as to more faithfully and imaginatively embody for the world 'the increase of the love of God and [humanity]' as its specific yet multi-faceted mission. Of special note here, is Niebuhr's acute insight into the various distortions or 'deformations' that the Church falls prey to, and which thus calls for what he describes as 'a radically monotheistic reformation'. Niebuhr's critique of the Christian community is arguably one of the most penetrating yet potentially wholesome offered by any theologian, and yields a very incisive, yet profoundly necessary, 'negative ecclesiology' in which various destructive ideologies and idolatries are exposed to the gospel's cleansing and healing. In a similar line of thought to the previous ethical chapter we will also see Niebuhr's suggestions for how the Christian community may be reformed or positively reorientated towards its true calling as 'the responsible church'. As such it is a 'Christo-morphic' community which is corporately responsible to God for the world as 'apostle, pastor and pioneer'. The spirituality of Niebuhr's understanding of the *ecclesia crucis* is then more fully explored under the rubric 'Participation in the Present Passion.'

In chapter five, Niebuhr's work is mined for, and considered from, an *ecumenical* perspective. The various shades of meaning associated with the admittedly equivocal term 'ecumenical' will inform the structure of our analysis. Working from within outwards, so to speak, we will first of all take a look at Niebuhr's involvement in what many people take to be the only or predominant meaning of the term: the work of church-union. Niebuhr was

initially much involved in enterprises of this kind, helping to bring about several unions of smaller denominations, but over the years this impulse seemed to wane. Next we will look at how much potential Niebuhr's 'radical monotheism' may have as a reconciling resource between the, at least, 'officially monotheistic' religions, namely, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. A further feature of this chapter is to bring Niebuhr's work on 'henotheism' into dialogue with a recent project in Northern Ireland called 'Moving Beyond Sectarianism', a project which I was personally involved in, and a subject to which, I am convinced, Niebuhr has much to offer. Finally, we will consider what is here called 'a larger ecumenism', that is, the ways in which Niebuhr has something to contribute in terms of the 'ecological' and 'economic' realities of contemporary globalisation. His call from within the logic of radical monotheism for 'the love of all that participates in being' gives his work a universal sensibility that puts him in company with several leading contemporary ethicists, whose work we will touch on.

In chapter six, we will consider Niebuhr's work from an *eschatological* perspective. Although, as was typical of his doctrinal or dogmatic reticence, he never developed a detailed or full-blown eschatology, nonetheless, there are sufficient materials scattered throughout his corpus to allow at least a suggestive, if not exhaustive, *eschatologia crucis* to emerge. First, we will analyse his brief reflections on the parousia of Jesus Christ, in which the form or forms of the coming of Jesus Christ is more closely akin to Barth's position, rather than to someone for whom Niebuhr felt great affinity on many matters, namely, his brother Reinhold. Next, we will look at his view on a central theme throughout his writings, the 'kingdom' or 'sovereignty' of God. For Niebuhr, this was a rich and nuanced reality, but what will be of chief interest at this point of the thesis will be its eschatological dimension. To paraphrase the thrust of his reflections, the kingdom is 'an emergent reality with universal intent.' Finally, we will consider his reflections on the so-called 'theological' virtues of faith, love and hope. Throughout the thesis, most of our attention has focussed on faith since this was the predominant concern of Niebuhr's work. But there are also important things that he says about the two other virtues, or as he prefers to them 'relations', and here we will concentrate especially on hope.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, a summation of Niebuhr's work will be offered, making use of the six perspectives or loci which constitute the main chapters of this thesis. From each locus our attention will focus especially on the way in which his distinctive *theologia crucis* is of crucial importance to his central 'Christo-morphic' motifs of radical monotheism and responsibility. His legacy is that of a worthy and distinct contribution to our understanding of Christian discipleship presented primarily as an ethos of the cross.



## Chapter One: An Existential Perspective

### 1. 'Pistology': Analysing the Faith of the Social Self

The task of the discipline of theology, broadly defined, has been given classic expression in the well-known formula 'faith seeking understanding'. Different theologians have, of course, treated this subject matter in their own distinct ways, and in this thesis I shall offer an exposition and reinterpretation of H. Richard Niebuhr's work in this field, since it unearths much rich material for further consideration as a *theologia crucis*.<sup>50</sup>

Before we begin to ponder his analysis, however, some comments are in order regarding the terminology in this first section of chapter one. The word 'pistology' is one which Niebuhr himself coined, and is formed from the base, *pistis*, the Greek New Testament word for faith, or sometimes, faithfulness. As Niebuhr's son writes, this 'is structurally analogous to the familiar term *epistemological*, formed on the base *epistme*, that is, knowledge'.<sup>51</sup> As his son also writes in the preface to the same book, the chief aim of Niebuhr's essay was 'to inquire into the forms and structure of human faith as we experience faith in our times and thus into the nature of our *social selfhood*'.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Diane Yeager entitles an important essay on Niebuhr, *The Social Self in the Pilgrim Church*, in the process putting her finger very accurately on the pulse of his life and work.<sup>53</sup> We shall shortly see, I believe, as our exposition and interpretation unfolds in this

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<sup>50</sup> Much of my thesis will involve close readings and extensive quotations from Niebuhr's corpus but only so can we get to the point of carrying out any meaningful interpretation of his work. On the necessity of such careful expositions of 'classic' theological texts, what he calls 'a rather neglected art', see the comments of John Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought*, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1998, p.7. For example, Webster writes: 'Sometimes dismissed as scholasticism, it is in fact a much more engaged and vital art.'

<sup>51</sup> HRN, *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989, p. 64. [Editor's note by Richard R. Niebuhr]. It should be noted, however, that Barth had already anticipated, and largely repudiated, this type of enquiry, one to which he gives the label 'pisteology': see Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1963, p. 99.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, p.ix. My italics added for emphasis.

<sup>53</sup> D. M. Yeager, 'The Social Self in the Pilgrim Church,' pp. 91-126, in Glenn H. Stassen ed., *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1996.

chapter, that the 'social self' is a helpful and accurate designation of Niebuhr's anthropological approach to the question of faith.<sup>54</sup>

One of the noteworthy features of Niebuhr's work was his willingness to reach beyond the sometimes narrow or restricted circle of fellow theological practitioners in an attempt to consider the nature of faith and ethics from other possibly fruitful or helpful perspectives. A particularly important example of this procedure was his abiding interest in the fields of philosophy<sup>55</sup> and the social sciences, the latter of which was only beginning to emerge with any great prominence when Niebuhr was starting out on his professional academic career. His persistent concern with what we are here designating the 'social self' is not only indebted to his understanding of the biblical and theological traditions in which he was well versed, but also influenced by the insights of various thinkers in the field of social psychology and other related disciplines.<sup>56</sup>

To quote just one of these thinkers whose influence upon his own work Niebuhr was glad to acknowledge, George Herbert Mead writes that '[t]he self, as that which can be an object to itself is essentially a social structure,

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<sup>54</sup> For an interesting anthropological analysis in which the 'self' is construed through numerous historical paradigms see Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. It is Grenz's anthropology, especially in chapters 2 and 3 of his study, which is of more relevance to my thesis than his 'social' model of the Trinity.

<sup>55</sup> The philosopher who probably did most to shape Niebuhr's thought was Immanuel Kant. In response to a query entitled: 'What books did most to shape your vocational attitude and your philosophy of life?' Niebuhr included both Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of Practical Reason*. HRN, 'Ex Libris,' *The Christian Century* 79 (1961), p. 574. Niebuhr also used the term 'neo-Kantian epistemology' to help describe his own intellectual approach, HRN, 'Reformation: Continuing Imperative,' *The Christian Century* 77 (1960), p. 249. See also Joseph S. Pagano, 'The Origins and Development of the Triadic Structure of Faith in H. Richard Niebuhr: A Study of the Kantian and Pragmatic Background of Niebuhr's Thought,' Ph.D. dissertation, Marquette University, 2001.

<sup>56</sup> G. H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, edited and introduced by Charles W. Morris, Chicago, University Press of Chicago, 1934; G. H. Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present*, edited by Arthur E. Murphy, Chicago, Open Court, 1932; A. Strauss, ed., *The Social Psychology of George Herbert Mead*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1956; Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity*, 2 volumes, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1912; Josiah Royce, *The Philosophy of Loyalty*, New York, Macmillan, 1924; Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, New York, Scribner, 1958; Paul Pfitzger, *The Social Self*, New York, Bookman Associates, 1954. See also Niebuhr's own important reflections on the nature of our social selfhood in HRN, 'Responsibility in Society,' chapter 2 of *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*, New York, Harper and Row, 1963, pp. 69-89.

and it arises in social experience. After a self has arisen, it in a certain sense provides for itself its social experiences, and so we can conceive of an absolutely solitary self. But it is impossible to conceive of a self arising outside of social experience.’<sup>57</sup> Mead, like Niebuhr after him, was reluctant to engage very much in the way of metaphysical speculation. Instead, his interests centred on the more functional nature of human behaviour, particularly the ways in which selves were inescapably *social*, shaping each other fundamentally through various interactions, among which language or ‘vocal gestures’ were especially important in helping to form characteristic patterns of mutual response. As Niebuhr himself puts it:

The fundamental form of human association . . . is not that contract society into which men enter as atomic individuals, making partial commitments to each other for the sake of gaining limited common ends or of maintaining certain laws; it is rather the face-to-face community in which unlimited commitments are the rule and in which every aspect of every self’s existence is conditioned by membership in the interpersonal group. . . . To say the self is social is not to say that it finds itself in need of fellow men in order to achieve its purposes, but that it is born in the womb of society as a sentient, thinking, needful being with certain definitions of its needs and with the possibility of experience of a common world. It is born in society as mind and as moral being, but above all it is born in society as self.<sup>58</sup>

We are now in a better position therefore, to begin our exposition of Niebuhr’s distinctive analysis of the faith structure of social selfhood. His proposal is that ‘[f]aith seeks understanding in a double way. It seeks to understand *what* it believes but also *how* it believes.’<sup>59</sup> This claim is based upon similar insights into two other activities: namely, knowing and valuing. In our role as those who pursue knowledge, we seek clarity about our knowing activities as well as about known realities; and in our role as those who evaluate, we find ourselves impelled to inquire into our choosing no less than into the nature of chosen and rejected values. Therefore, argues

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<sup>57</sup> A. Strauss, ed., *The Social Psychology of George Herbert Mead*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1956, p. 217.

<sup>58</sup> HRN, *The Responsible Self*, p. 73.

<sup>59</sup> HRN, *Faith on Earth*, p. 23

Niebuhr, as believing beings, we want to know *how* we believe as well as *what* we believe.

Niebuhr calls his approach here ‘the method of reflection’.<sup>60</sup> He suggests that ‘It is only by looking within ourselves and catching as it were the reflections of ourselves in act that we are able to achieve some degree of critical self-awareness.’<sup>61</sup> Niebuhr acknowledges that this method is subjective, but he argues that, properly pursued, it need not fall prey to ‘the error of a subjectivism that abstracts subjective activity from its objects.’<sup>62</sup> Its aim is primarily self-knowledge but not in terms of the isolated ‘Cartesian-I’, but rather in a way that ‘is always interpersonal, dependent on communication, seeking verification, correction and guidance from the reflections of others as these are mediated through statements about faith and definitions of the idea of faith.’<sup>63</sup> In short, it is a methodology of, and for, human beings as social selves.

In a line of argument, similar to that employed more recently by others, among whom we identify two, namely, Nicholas Lash and Rowan Williams,<sup>64</sup> Niebuhr contends that ‘Reflection on faith, like every other reflective inquiry, must begin . . . right in the middle of things. It cannot “begin at the beginning” of the dialogue between subject and object or of the dialogue between self and other selves. Nor can it begin at some point in the self outside of the activity that is the object of reflection. It must perforce accept not only the activity of its object but of the presence in the reflecting self of the very activity that is being objectified.’<sup>65</sup>

To those who are familiar with the debate in modern Protestant theology, Niebuhr can be said to be consciously choosing a third option which is distinct from, yet deliberately placed between, methodologies which are

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp. 23ff.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>64</sup> Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God: A Reading of the Apostles’ Creed*, London, SCM, 1992, p.2; Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000, p. xii

<sup>65</sup> HRN, *Faith on Earth*, pp. 24-25

predominantly subjective or objective. 'Between Barth, the great objectivist in theology who proposes to begin and remain with the object of faith and theology, and Schleiermacher, the great subjectivist who undertook to understand the subject with his attitudes and commitments, I cannot judge so as to say that the one is right and the other wrong. Nor do I know of a human court which can make the judgment. Insofar as I am unable to abstract object from subject I can and do take exception to Barth's special dogmatism which requires me to begin with no other object than God as speaking in and proclaimed in the Scriptures. . . . I can only say that Barth's problem is not mine, while Schleiermacher's is, and I see no reason why I should give up my problem because some folk say it is a pseudo-problem and call my statements nonsense because they cannot translate them into their objectivist language.'<sup>66</sup> But lest it be thought that he leans too far in his epistemology towards the subjectivist or pragmatist poles, it should be borne in mind that Niebuhr considers that 'objectivism rather than pragmatism is the first law of knowledge.'<sup>67</sup> Whilst aware of the difficulties involved in his own methodology, Niebuhr reckons that some otherwise neglected, yet crucial insights, will emerge from this procedure. To some of these we now turn.

In guiding these reflections on the phenomenology of belief, Niebuhr helpfully draws upon the three Latin words that lie behind our English words. These Latin words all share the one common root ('fid-') in a way which the equivalent English words do not, and in doing so they open up the prospect of understanding 'faith' as a complex, yet interrelated structure or action. The Latin word *fides* is rendered in English as believing, this is 'the

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<sup>66</sup> HRN, Handwritten manuscript entitled *Between Barth and Schleiermacher*, undated, p. 2. For more on the issue of Barth and Schleiermacher, and how their respective methodologies and legacies may be related see James O. Duke and Robert F. Streetman eds., *Barth and Schleiermacher: Beyond the Impasse?* Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1988; Bruce L. McCormack, 'What Has Basel to Do with Berlin? Continuities in the Theologies of Barth and Schleiermacher,' *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, 23, 2, (2002), pp. 146-173.

<sup>67</sup> HRN, *The Kingdom of God in America*, op. cit., p. 12.

phenomenal element which is largely based on the fundamental interaction of *fiducia* (trust) and *fidelitas* (loyalty or faithfulness).<sup>68</sup>

For example, the faith that one finds in a significant relationship between two people is expressed in mutual form. On the basis of their many and diverse experiences of each other, these two people relate to each other in terms of reciprocal trust and fidelity. 'Trust is a response to and an acknowledgement of fidelity. The two are so interrelated in the reciprocal action of selves that one cannot speak of faith simply as the trust which appears but must speak of it also as the fidelity to which trust is the response.'<sup>69</sup> One person's faithfulness to the other is the gift that calls forth the response of trust, which is faith in its more passive sense; yet it also evokes fidelity, which is faith in its more active sense. Each person trusts, and therefore seeks to be faithful to the other, in that ongoing interpersonal interaction which we are here calling 'faith'.

Taking this analysis a stage further, Niebuhr states that faith is thus 'the attitude and action of confidence in, and fidelity to, certain realities as the sources of value and the objects of loyalty. This personal attitude or action is ambivalent; it involves reference to the value that attaches to the self and to the value toward which the self is directed. On the one hand it is trust in that which gives value to the self; on the other hand it is loyalty to what the self values. Friendship may be taken as a simple example of such an ambivalent relation. In friendship I believe in my friend as one who values me; I have confidence in him that he will continue to regard me as valuable; I also value him and am loyal to him. Insofar as faith is present in friendship it is a double movement of trust in the friend who is a source of my value and of loyalty to him as value objective to me.'<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., pp. 47-48. See also HRN, 'The Triad of Faith,' *Andover Newton Bulletin* 47 (1954), pp. 3-12, esp. p. 6; HRN, 'On the Nature of Faith,' In S. Hook, ed., *Religious Experience and Truth: A Symposium*, New York, New York University Press, 1961, pp. 93-102, esp. 98-100.

<sup>69</sup> HRN, *Faith on Earth*, op. cit., p. 47.

<sup>70</sup> HRN, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture with Supplementary Essays*, New York, Harper and Row, 1957, pp. 16-17.

A further, helpful example of this kind of relationship, and one which Niebuhr also expounds, is that of a healthy marriage between husband and wife.<sup>71</sup> But as soon as we begin to reflect further on this specific example, we become aware of the fact that husband and wife do not simply desire to be faithful to each other, but also seek to be loyal to a third entity. Niebuhr calls this third thing an "It". This "It" is related to, but distinct from, the "I and Thou" who are the marriage partners, and is perhaps better named "the Cause". In terms of a marriage, this "cause" may be understood in various ways: perhaps as the marriage relationship itself; or perhaps as the basis and context for nurturing children; or even as the attempt to create an 'ideal home'. Whatever the specific variables may be in any particular instance, however, Niebuhr maintains that faith always has this 'triadic' character, where the three elements of the triad can be designated as "I, Thou and It"; or better still, "I, Thou and the Cause".

An obvious, and indeed, attested source for some of Niebuhr's reflections here, is the work of Josiah Royce. Royce had developed a theory of knowledge in which interpretation had a triadic structure always involving self, other and object in a community of mutual involvement.<sup>72</sup> But perhaps the heart of Royce's thought, and the point of his greatest influence on Niebuhr, lies in the concept of *loyalty*. 'A man is loyal when, first, he has some *cause* to which he is loyal; when, second, he *willingly* and *thoroughly* devotes himself to this cause; and when, third, he expresses his devotion to some *sustained and practical way*, by acting steadily in the service of his cause.'<sup>73</sup> One important qualification that Niebuhr however makes of Royce's proposal, is that, whereas Royce regarded loyalty itself as the highest or greatest or most inclusive cause, Niebuhr proposes that loyalty properly exists only to serve the cause of something other or transcendent to itself.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> HRN, *Faith on Earth*, pp. 55-57.

<sup>72</sup> Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity, Vol. 2: The Real World and the Christian Ideas*, New York, Macmillan, 1913, pp. 140-144; 208-211.

<sup>73</sup> Josiah Royce, *The Philosophy of Loyalty*, op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>74</sup> HRN, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, pp. 33-34.

Another example of such a triadic relationship, and one which takes us further into the heart of Niebuhr's distinctive analysis of the faith of the social self, is that of the patriotic nationalist. Such a person relates to his country by relying upon it, often uncritically and unreflectively, as his 'enduring value-center'<sup>75</sup>. However, although the continued existence of the nation does, to some extent, depend upon the faithful allegiance of each of its citizens, it functions as far more of a transcendent entity than do any of the individual people who together make it a consciously collective community. Strictly speaking then, the nationalist depends upon, or trusts his country for a sense of worth, significance, value, purpose and meaning much more than it does upon him.<sup>76</sup>

Faith, therefore, in this Niebuhrian sense, can be described as trusting in a 'value-center' and being loyal to this same value-center's 'cause', for, according to Niebuhr, '[c]enters of value and causes may . . . be . . . two names for the same objective realities from which and for which selves live as valued and valuing beings.'<sup>77</sup> My own slight modification to this, is to speak of faith as involving interpersonal interaction with objective realities that are held to be 'trustworthy value centres' and 'worthwhile common causes'. In each instance, the use of the root '-worth-' is an attempt to make more explicit the sense of devotion, as well as valuation, to which Niebuhr's faith analysis implicitly points.

It does not seem to be too much of an assumption to suggest that the thrust of Niebuhr's argument is that this interpersonal interaction of faith, as confidence in a trustworthy value centre and loyalty to a worthwhile common cause, is a general or even universal feature of human nature. It is therefore, not only, or even especially, in what might be called 'official religious contexts' that people seek to live by faith. We all live, it seems, by trust in some value centre or centres, and by loyalty to some cause or causes. Several questions loom large at this point and these will need to be

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<sup>75</sup> Note Niebuhr's Americanised spelling 'center'. Whenever Niebuhr is directly quoted this Americanised spelling will be used, but in my own text I will use the English 'centre'.

<sup>76</sup> HRN, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, op. cit., pp. 17-18.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.



addressed if Niebuhr's 'pistology' is to prove plausible. For instance, does Niebuhr provide a sufficiently recognizable or compelling description of the social self in its web of interpersonal interactions? Does his proposed 'faith-analysis' really work as a means of identifying characteristic traits that are truly representative of the everyday lives of human beings? What objective realities, if any, are we living by and for, as trusting and would-be faithful selves? To these, and other related questions, we now turn in the remainder of this chapter.

## **2. The Faithlessness of the Social Self**

According to Niebuhr, the apparently simple word 'faith' has, in fact, several interlocking dimensions or aspects, none of which alone can give a full and comprehensive definition of what is involved. Faith is far more complex and nuanced than popular usage tends to think. Depending on the specific circumstance in question, 'trust' may be of foremost importance, at another stage 'loyalty' might become most prominent, or there again 'belief' will, on occasion, occupy our concerns. However, whilst one or more of these aspects of faith will predominate, the others can always be assumed to be present, even if only in implicit form in any particular instance.

By the same Niebuhrian logic, the converse is also true. Where 'faith' is called into question, undermined, or otherwise distorted, one can posit that all three aspects (belief, trust and loyalty) will be radically affected. For example, if you were to say that some recent incident led you to the belief that I was no longer the kind of person who was trustworthy, it would likely lead to you no longer trusting me with anything of great significance, with the probable consequence that you doubted my loyalty to you, and the further quite understandable strategy that you no longer felt able to be loyal to me or our former friendship. Your interpretation of some unworthy

action, perhaps taking the form of some real or perceived faithlessness on my behalf, can possibly and quite easily, though not inevitably, lead to a state of affairs in which our former friendship, based on mutual beliefs about each other, and thus involving reciprocal trust and loyalty, now changes into mutual faithlessness. Since we live inextricably in a web of interpersonal interaction as social selves, one person's faithlessness, whether it initially be in the form of distrust, disloyalty or disbelief, can have devastating and pervasive consequences for whoever is caught up in the 'force-field' of that particular communal context.<sup>78</sup>

The interpretation that I now present in the next two sections of this chapter, will involve an exposition of how Niebuhr understands *the faithlessness of the social self*. Two lines of analysis will be opened up and explored, but this is only for the purpose of clarifying each one in greater depth. What should be borne in mind is that these are not entirely separate or unrelated issues, but rather two distinct aspects of one comprehensive whole, which, for the purpose of better understanding, need to be analysed successively, one at a time. Like any effort in analysis, such a procedure necessarily abstracts from real life, but only with the aim of furthering our knowledge of the object of enquiry.

The first aspect we will explore is that of 'the *broken* faith of the social self'. There is a relative emphasis here on the personal disposition of the human self whose faith, as a sense of primordial sense of trust in some 'other', is called into such radical question that the result is an underlying distrust of other selves, whether that be 'life' or 'other people' or even 'God'. The tendency here, as we shall see, is for various forms of faithlessness to occur in relation to some objective realities which are no longer regarded as trustworthy. Niebuhr calls this 'broken faith' and we shall explore his agonised analysis of this multi-faceted condition.

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<sup>78</sup> For a perceptive and illuminating treatment of these themes see Onora O'Neill, *A Question of Trust: The BBC Reith Lectures 2002*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

The second aspect to be considered is that of ‘the *misplaced* faith of the *social self*’. Here the emphasis falls more upon the social connections of the self as it engages with the realities and relations of whatever communal context it finds itself in. Various objective realities are responded to, or posited by, the social self, and in this part of our analysis we shall consider more carefully the nature and obligations of the value centres which we humans reckon to be trustworthy, and which also thus demand of us that we be loyal or committed to the supposedly worthwhile common causes that they embody and espouse. We will focus here on the destructive pathos of misplacing one’s faith in relation to any objective reality other than God, the One whom the biblical witness renders as creator and redeemer.

### 3. The *Broken Faith of the Social Self*

Niebuhr clearly wants us to consider the phenomenon of interpersonal faith as a universal feature that we may assume or posit in human nature per se. In an important paragraph that warrants full citation, Niebuhr begins to suggest some of the connections that lie at the very heart of his ‘pistology’. He writes:

When we have inquired thus far into the structure of faith there appears on the horizon the mystery of the Transcendent. It seems that even when we deal with the structures of faith as we find them in our ordinary experience we are dealing with realities that point beyond themselves to a cause beyond all causes, to an object of loyalty beyond all concrete persons and abstract values, to the Being or the Ground of Being which obligates and demands trust, which unites us in universal community. In the light of Christian faith this is evidently so. The structures of faith which we find in our world are not only shadows and images of divine things but participate in the ultimate structure. Behind the faiths and communities of faith in which we are united in family and nation and company of scholars there looms the grand structure of a community of faith which is universal, in which all selves are involved as companions and in which the third, the cause and object of trust, is the transcendent reality, present wherever two or three are present to each other or anyone is present to himself. This

structure, to be sure, rises into view only in broken form; as a structure in which faith in its negative aspects as disloyalty and distrust comes to appearance more frequently than in its positive form. But though in ruined form yet there are evidences of its presence in all our existences as faithful-unfaithful selves.<sup>79</sup>

What one notices here is the way in which Niebuhr takes the interpersonal interactions between human beings, understood in terms of reciprocal trust and loyalty, and follows the trajectory that is, he thinks, plausibly implicit within them, so as to bring into view that larger or universal community of beings whose source and centre is transcendent to them all; the One who in the theocentric traditions of Judaeo-Christian discourse is called 'God'. Niebuhr is well aware of the suggestions or criticisms that can be aimed at his methodology, especially the allegation that what he is presenting is just another form of self-deceiving subjectivism, a sort of 'projectionism'. Anticipating such objections he thus writes:

As we have reflected on faith we have come to see that it is no merely subjective experience. When it appears in the subject it appears as the response to and acknowledgement of another person who like the self exists in trust and loyalty. Faith, selfhood and other-self are inseparable. Moreover the presence of faith in life, whether in its positive or negative form, always represents the acknowledgment of something personal in the Transcendent. The reality of selfhood or, to use the good old fashioned term, of the soul, comes to appearance in the activity of trusting and distrusting, being loyal and deceiving. The reality of an other self is acknowledged, depended upon in the act of trusting and distrusting, being faithful to him and deceiving him. The reality of God, of the Transcendent One, is obscurely acknowledged in life's distrust and anxiety and openly so in trust in Him, loyalty to Him and loyalty to the objects of his loyalty. The certainty of faith may be stated in a somewhat Cartesian fashion: I believe (i.e. trust-distrust, swear allegiance and betray) therefore I know that I am, but also I trust you and therefore I am certain that you are, and I trust and distrust the Ultimate Environment, the Absolute Source of my being, therefore I acknowledge that He is. There are three realities of which I am certain, self, companions and the Transcendent.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> HRN, *Faith on Earth*, pp. 60-61.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

At this stage in his exposition, Niebuhr briefly alludes to the fact that he could pursue the option of pressing his 'pistological' method further, in the interests of an apologetic or even ontological argument for the existence of God. But he declines to do so since he feels that he would thus be confusing the role of the theologian with that of the philosopher, and would be expecting people to make an epistemological leap that the available evidence could not necessarily prove or sustain. 'His method therefore,' he writes, 'must always be the method of confession and demonstration.'<sup>81</sup> Theology is an effort to understand a faith that has been given, not an effort to understand in order that we may believe.'<sup>82</sup>

'Our procedure therefore must be this,' Niebuhr writes, 'that we now use the understanding we have gained of the general structure of faith in interpersonal life for the sake of analysing, as best we may, that faith in God of which we are conscious in ourselves in the company of the faithful.'<sup>83</sup> It would seem, therefore, that Niebuhr has indeed opted for a more Schleiermachean than Barthian approach, in that relatively more attention is being paid to the subjective, or better still, inter-subjective or interpersonal dynamics of the faith disposition of the social self. The objective pole of Barthian methodology will not be dispensed with altogether, but rather will be approached inductively through an analysis of the existential phenomenology of the believing subject.

So what is it that Niebuhr suggests we find as we so engage in self-reflection upon the interpersonal faith-structure that is seemingly given, simply by existing as a human being? 'What we become aware of first of all when we

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 64. See Martin L. Cook, *The Open Circle: Confessional Method in Theology*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1991, pp. 67ff. for an appreciative analysis of Niebuhr's 'confessionalism'. Quite how to classify Niebuhr's methodology here according to the conventional labels of 'foundationalism' as opposed to 'confessionalism' is an intriguing question. As is often the case with Niebuhr, he seems to somehow defy or transcend straightforward typologies. Cook defines *foundationalism* as 'the belief that the meaning and truth of religious intellectual schemes must be supported and warranted by showing their coherence with perspectives and information that are not distinctively religious or tied to a particular religious community. In contrast, *confessionalism* argues that theology derives its core insights and starting point from the perspective unique to the Christian religious community. On the basis of this claim, confessional thinkers reject the belief that some allegedly common human experience authorizes or justifies distinctively Christian discourse.' Cook, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>82</sup> HRN, *Faith on Earth*, p. 64.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

direct our attention to it is that it has always been present to us in a negative form and is now so present to us. Faith in God is the accompaniment of our existence as selves but first of all it is a dark background; it is present negatively as distrust and fear and hostility.<sup>84</sup>

A little later he states that this, '[our] natural faith, our ordinary human attitude toward the transcendent source of our existence, is one of disappointment, of distrust, and of disbelief.'<sup>85</sup> But '[in] seeking to understand it we are not only trying to reconstruct man's relation to the Transcendent prior to the advent of Jesus Christ or to remember our own relation to God prior to the slow or sudden communication of the faith of Jesus Christ to us in our new self-aware selfhood. We are trying to understand something in our present life, an old relation that may be passing away but which is nevertheless present. If such a venture seems highly confessional it is so not only in an individualistic but also in a communal sense since the evidences of the presence of this natural religion of negative faith are to be discovered not only in ourselves but in our companions, in their express statements as well as in their symbolic behavior.'<sup>86</sup>

What Niebuhr's argument here seems to amount to, is that he, as a Christian believer and theologian, already lives by, and knows of, God's redeeming and reconciling work in Jesus Christ; so it could be argued, that both chronologically and logically, his argument and my thesis should begin with an explication or unfolding of faith's positive or evangelical content. However while this faith-knowledge is indeed presupposed and acknowledged, nonetheless, in terms of the force and persuasiveness of his essay, Niebuhr prefers to begin, at least descriptively, with a phenomenological analysis of our faithless existential condition, in all its tragedy, drama and pain. He begins, therefore, to detail these features of negative or broken faith thus:

"The mind of the flesh," says Paul, "is enmity to God" (Rom. 8:7). We may state the thought more abstractly for the moment by saying that our natural, though not our fundamental, human relation to the Transcendent is one of distrust toward what is

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

conceived to be deceptive, a distrust which appears in hostility, fear and isolation. These three forms are not wholly separable though in certain instances one or the other seems to prevail and to give a dominant tone to life in faithlessness. Sometimes defiance marks the human attitude in man's encounter with the ultimate antagonist; more frequently the sense of antagonism appears in the form of human fear before the powerful enemy and perhaps still more frequently the effort is made to put all thought of the Other out of the mind while the self devotes itself to the little struggles and victories of life. All three attitudes may be present in each individual, though publicly they are usually expressed by different individuals.<sup>87</sup>

Niebuhr then undertakes a rich descriptive analysis of these three forms of broken or perverted faith<sup>88</sup> in which his ability to enter into the labyrinths of the rebellious self or sinful soul is quite remarkable. Speaking first of the self's 'hostility' toward 'the Transcendent, the Determiner of Destiny', he suggests that overt expression of this 'is relatively rare' lest the Deity be aroused to even greater wrath against his creatures. However, when defiance does, on occasion prevail over repression, such hostility as is expressed is basically due to 'the sense of profound disillusionment, of broken promise' that somehow God has failed to live up to what we had hoped or expected from him.<sup>89</sup> In its wiser and tragic forms, this 'Promethean motif in natural religion does not arise out of the simple confrontation of the self with Transcendence, with the Unconditioned, with the determination of destiny. It arises rather out of the triadic situation in which a self bound to other human selves in loyalty raises its voice against Omnipotence on behalf of others.'<sup>90</sup> Indeed, what seems to be most characteristic about this existential stance is that 'if the nature of things is the creation of a transcendent God, then that God is our enemy, and if it is not then the world itself is our enemy, and must be resisted though the fight may be carried on without personal hatred. What man is up against is not something neutral but something that is against him. Hence the proper attitude of man toward the Transcendent is defiance in the name of humane feeling or spiritual values.'<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., pp. 68-77.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., pp. 68-69. Niebuhr cites several pertinent quotes from literature to illustrate his point.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

The second form that Niebuhr sees human faithlessness take in relation to God is 'the natural religion of fear which is only the counterpart of hostility. . . . In either case, whether aggressiveness or fear prevails, the situation between the Transcendent and the distrusting self among selves is felt as an antagonism.'<sup>92</sup> When it comes to the 'natural religion of anxiety and fear, ' it would seem, therefore, that it is 'either more aware of the all-powerful character of what man confronts than Promethean defiance is, or it is less confident of human power to contend with the "Omnificent," or it is less loyal to fellowmen and simply more self-centred. In any case it seeks to deal with the same situation of enmity between the Ultimate and man which Prometheanism has in view; only its approach is one of appeasement.'<sup>93</sup>

In Niebuhr's exposition, appreciative reference is made to those who have traced this phenomenon in, for instance, ancient Greek religion, but he also states his unease with the 'subjectivist prejudice of social psychology' of these studies with their tendency to interpret such behaviour as 'the mere projection of the emotion of the ritual.'<sup>94</sup> Rather, we would do better, he believes, 'to think of these shadowy figures, the wraithlike, insubstantial gods of appeasement, as symbols of that Transcendent, that Nature of Things, before which man is afraid. What men have done to appease "the unknown wraths of the surrounding darkness" by means of human and animal sacrifices, by their rituals of placation through burnt offerings and sin-offerings, by physical and mental ablutions, self-castigations, by pilgrimages and prayers, represents a large part of the story of religion in the world.'<sup>95</sup> In its most extreme forms, this natural religion of distrust and fear is communicated in such a coercive or controlling fashion that people 'are brought up from infancy with the idea that they are being watched by a vindictive supernatural reality which inflicts punishment here and hereafter on those who infringe upon the laws. The imagery of hell and heaven, particularly of the former, is introduced into the minds in many subtle ways. Over all life there lies the fear of a strange justice

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 72

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., pp. 72-73.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.



which upholds laws that are supernaturally established and unintelligible in rational terms. Life is lived amidst strange taboos; the threat of disaster hangs over it as it touches, tastes and handles the precarious objects of daily life.<sup>96</sup> In short, '[I]f defiance says, "I am against God," fear says, "God is against me"; if the former is animated toward defiance by love of its fellowmen, the latter is frightened by the threat of disaster not only to the self but to those whom it loves.'<sup>97</sup>

In addition to these two forms of natural distrust of the Transcendent, Niebuhr identifies 'a third form – the form of isolation and forgetfulness. If the dark rites of primitive religion give evidence of the distrust that appears in fear, the bright and speciously happy converse with the deities of Olympus illustrates the turning of distrust into the defensive mechanism whereby men try to forget the presence of an ultimate reality while they construct for themselves an imaginary world in which they can pretend to be at peace.'<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, it would appear that the 'denial of transcendent unity has its counterpart in the denial of the unity of the self. The flight from the other is accompanied by the flight from the self while the effort is made to interpret the world as superficial, without depth or meaning, without foundation or superstructure. One flees from the ultimate to the near and tries to live among the things that are close at hand with such peace of mind and such pleasure as one can extract from them.'<sup>99</sup> The success of such efforts is, of course, deeply questionable, for whatever satisfaction might be attained in the short term, is seemingly and ultimately haunted by 'an expression of despair', all the sadder, perhaps, 'because it is not aware of itself as despair.'<sup>100</sup>

Having thus provided a detailed description of these three forms of broken faith as distrust of God, Niebuhr then poses a further fundamental question which enables him to say a bit more about why these phenomenological features of false faith forms should occur:

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., pp. 76-77.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

What is the source of this deep distrust of that One from which we all proceed? It is a strange fact that the explanations of its presence reduplicate the ideas connected with its various forms of expression. In mythologies and theologies we undertake to account for the fact that our relation as selves to the Transcendent appears in our lives in the perverted form of disappointment. And our explanations seem to follow the three main lines of our effort to deal with the distrusted One. (1) In our defiance we say that we were thus created, thus formed as selves, that anxiety is the natural form of our finite existence. (2) In our fear we blame ourselves, saying that we have fallen by self-will from our original right relation of faith in the Transcendent and that our anxiety is the punishment for our pride in wanting to be independent of the transcendent God or to be like him, living by our own power. (3) In our effort to escape into the imaginary world of the bright gods, into the little cities where we may be faithful to our little loyalties, we say that the whole dread of the Transcendent One is an invention and an illusion, that we may have been betrayed into this situation of fear and distrust by untrustworthy fellowmen. In the first case our creation is our fall; in the second, we tempt ourselves to our own undoing; in the third, we are the victims of our companions.<sup>101</sup>

Niebuhr is providing us here with an acute exploration of the terrain of the troubled soul, but it is crucial to remember that this exposition is only possible because of the presupposition that this is neither the first nor the last word about us. God's original intention for us is that we live by faith; even given that sin has entered into each and every dimension of our existence, the message of the Christian gospel is that God has, does and will reconcile us, thus reconstructing and restoring our broken and perverted faith relations.<sup>102</sup> As Niebuhr himself puts it: 'Our starting point is not the doctrine of the fall but the knowledge or hope of salvation. Yet there are two points about the fall that are noteworthy: first it is a genuine *fall* and cannot be the absolute beginning of our personal existence; and, second, that it is a complex interpersonal event in which the whole structure of faith is involved.'<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., pp. 77-78.

<sup>102</sup> Niebuhr was fond of paraphrasing A. N. Whitehead's notion that salvation enabled people to move from relating to God as 'Void' and then 'Enemy' to 'Companion' or 'Friend'. See HRN, *The Kingdom of God in America*, op. cit., p. 192; Fowler, op. cit., p. 59.

<sup>103</sup> HRN, *Faith on Earth*, op. cit., p. 78.

According to Niebuhr, it is important to remember that sin, here being described in terms of faithlessness in its various forms, is not the be all and end all of our lives. Such sin as faithlessness is only the penultimate, though granted, powerful and miserable, fact about our human condition. But because of God's act of revelation and reconciliation in Jesus Christ, we now have a greater, indeed, ultimate perspective on ourselves, namely, that there is salvation from sin, and, in particular, in Niebuhr's exposition, the restoration of our former faithlessness into the fullness and freedom of unqualified trust and loyalty in our relations to God and to other human selves. Niebuhr expounds this retrospective perspective, the first of the two points which he made above, from the standpoint of reconciled faith as follows, taking his cue from the biblical saga about Adam:

So far as the first point is concerned, there is wisdom in the saga of the first man and in the theological elaboration of that saga which posits a state of innocence before the fall. If faith is a dimension of personal existence, then it seems clear that distrust or disloyalty cannot be the first act. Distrust is only possible where the conditions for trust have first been established. One cannot suspect another of lying and deceiving except in a situation where loyalty is expected. A promise must be made before it can be broken. The negative relations of distrust, disloyalty and disbelief all presuppose the previous establishment of trust, loyalty and belieffulness. Lies are an impossibility in a world where there is no truth, whereas the opposite is not true. Faithlessness does not eliminate the order of faith but perverts it. The order still exists; if it did not, not even distrust would be possible. If "fall" means distrust of God and disloyalty to Him it cannot mean the total destruction of our relation to God; it must rather mean that an ambivalence has entered into our personal relations which poisons and corrupts them. Hence distrust cannot be the fundamental element in our relations as selves to selves, above all to the Transcendent.<sup>104</sup>

We now take up the second aspect of his exposition where he says that our fall 'is a complex interpersonal event in which the whole structure of faith is involved.' Again it will be necessary to quote him at length, so that the full richness and power of his insights about the social self can be appreciated. Niebuhr writes:

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

In the second place, since the structure of our faith is so complex it seems evident that the perversion of the relationship which is involved cannot easily be blamed in a mechanical or an individualistic manner on an isolated act or person. Is the first act of faithlessness distrust or disloyalty? Is it disloyalty to God or to companions? Is it an act of disloyalty toward the self by a companion or by the self toward him? In our distrust we seek to place the blame. It is, we say, the woman who tempts the man with her distrust; it is the serpent who distrusts God; it is the giving of a commandment, the demand for loyalty, to one who is unable to bear the responsibility, which is responsible for the great debacle. But the fall of man precisely because it is an event in the faith relations of persons is an event in which no mechanical relations of cause and effect are present. Here disloyalty and distrust, self and neighbor, are so involved that the distrust of God is a response to the companion's deception or disloyalty and the self's disloyalty in the breaking of its own promise is another source of its distrust. For Luther the first sin is distrust which tempts man to break the law or his promise. But this distrust in God, this belief that he will not keep his promises, presupposes a desire or a will to break faith, since one does not suspect another of promise breaking if one has had no experience of it in oneself. When we look at the disorder of faith, at distrust and disloyalty in their manifold interrelations from the point of view of reconciliation, then the effort to place the blame on one criminal, whether the self or companion, whether the ancestor or the contemporary, evaporates in the recognition that all have sinned and that this does not mean that each one has sinned by himself but that all have sinned together.<sup>105</sup>

We have had to quote so extensively from Niebuhr's exposition so that its subtle and powerful insights can be appreciated. This particular part of his essay is of vital importance to his whole argument. Only by stressing how pervasive and interpersonal are the skewed structures of human faith as distrust and disloyalty, can Niebuhr's later talk of reconciliation in Christ be seen in something more of its full glory. The evangelical turning point is already presupposed here, and its fuller exposition will follow in due course, but first Niebuhr wants us to feel something of the force of the vicious circle of false faith in which we are all caught. He continues what he elsewhere calls his

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., pp. 78-79.

distinctive 'social existentialist'<sup>106</sup> approach by making the following comments, in the process offering insights which run contrary to much of what has passed, and still passes, for a very questionable form of so-called or would-be theological orthodoxy. He writes:

This sin is personal; it is the sin of the self in interpersonal relations, but it is not individual. There is no way of carving an individual self out of the web of responsible relations and setting it before the bar of justice as alone responsible. Before God it is man who finds himself in the wrong, but not man as distinguished from fellowmen. In the history of our faithlessness every man is his own Adam but no Adam is alone in his sinfulness; none falls in solitude. His solitude is a consequence of fallenness, not the cause of it. This is not to say to say that the fall of man into distrust is a social event over which the individual has no control. It is an interpersonal event which is something quite different from the sort of social event which we encounter in our institutions. In an interpersonal event every person participates with loyalty and disloyalty, trust and distrust; but none is in it alone and no decisions are purely individual decisions. Each act calls forth the moral reaction of others and is itself a reaction to the anticipated or remembered moral action of companions.<sup>107</sup>

This is Niebuhr's response to the individualism and atomism which plagues so much thinking about the nature of human sin. The interesting use of the courtroom metaphor in the above paragraph is part of Niebuhr's subtle subversion of the kind of unreflective moralistic attitude which forms a great deal of society's views on wrongdoing and responsibility. Such judgmental moralising often stems from populist and shallow interpretations of Christianity, understood here more as a 'religion' in the Barthian sense of deserving radical critique, in contrast to the genuinely 'interpersonal faith relationship' that God intends it to be, and which Niebuhr is working so hard to demonstrate here in his essay. Extensive quoting from the next paragraph in

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<sup>106</sup> HRN, *Christ and Culture*, New York, Harper & Row, 1951, pp. 241 ff. Niebuhr said that he felt 'great kinship' with Bultmann 'in his intentions'. This would seem to be, in large measure, because of the 'empirical and ethical strain' in their existentialist approaches. Bultmann's emphasis on individualism, however, seems abstract and reductionist, compared to Niebuhr's more social, communal and interpersonal emphases; see HRN, 'Reformation: Continuing Imperative,' op. cit., p. 250.

<sup>107</sup> HRN, *Faith on Earth*, p. 79.

*Faith on Earth* should help to drive home Niebuhr's point in terms of his distinctive social existentialism:

The story of each personal life makes clear how interpersonal the fall is. The self comes to awareness of itself, of its companions and of the common life with a sense of promise. The "promises of God" to us do not designate certain statements which are said to have been made to Abraham and his children. They designate that sense of meaningfulness and splendor with which personal being awakes to existence. There is in the background of existence, whether as memory of childhood, or as Platonic recollection of something heard in another existence, or as the echo of an inner voice, the sense of something glorious, splendid, clean and joyous for which this being and all being is intended. It is not a selfish or individualistic sense of promise, as though one felt oneself preferred to others or as though the promise would not be kept unless others were granted a smaller share of everlasting vitality. That mean and narrow mode of thinking comes later. The promise of life is the promise of glory and splendor, not for me, but for existence and for me as a part of this world of being. But to our personal life which begins with such a sense of promised brightness there comes, whether in childhood or adolescence or later, the great disillusionment. Things are not what they seem. The great tragic note which runs through all human literature and philosophy – the distance between appearance and reality – is sounded. Behind the splendor of life there is the putrescence of death. The virtues of our families and our friends cover deep shamefulness. There is a shame within ourselves. We also are not what we seem. Behind the pleasure and kindness about us there is wretchedness and cruelty. The odor of death, the feeling of betrayal, the sense of pollution, invades all existence. That things are not what they seem and that what they are is infinitely sadder, darker and more disappointing than what they appear to be – this is the theme which runs through Greek and modern tragedy, through Eastern and Western philosophy.<sup>108</sup>

Niebuhr has spared us little in his penetrating and poignant description of some central features of our fallen faithlessness. In offering this, his distinct, indeed, unique phenomenology of some of the more foreboding aspects of the *theologia crucis*, his chosen idiom of social existentialism is strikingly reminiscent of the writings of the early Barth. As Hans Frei has observed, this makes for a profoundly illuminating communicative experience in which the

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<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

reader recognizes much that is true of himself or herself in solidarity with the more general human condition being depicted in such dramatic terms.<sup>109</sup>

Niebuhr now makes a bit more explicit the religious roots of such existential faithlessness as it both contributes to, and in turn, arises from, our broken and perverted faith relations. He writes:

At the heart of this problem of deception and distrust is our relation to the nameless, ultimate Transcendent and Circumambient. The human distrust of life, of reality, of that out of which all things come, may in part be a result of all the deceptions and betrayals to which men have been subject in their relations to fellowmen, but to an even greater extent it seems that the temptations to deception and betrayal of companion by companion arise out of the distrust of Being. Because we think that if we do not maintain ourselves we will not be maintained; because we believe that if we do not fill a fleeting existence with values we have ourselves put there it will become valueless; because we deeply doubt that the Being or the source of being will bring success to our causes; therefore we think we cannot afford to keep our promises to each other, separately or in groups. The chain of distrust and disloyalty grows in length and complexity. The interpersonal interaction weaves back and forth with deceptions that call forth distrust, with distrust tempting to new betrayals, with families, nations and religions participating in the great confusion of the life of faith. This is our anxiety, a result not of our finiteness but of our dependence on an infinite and on finites which have the freedom to deceive us.<sup>110</sup>

We have now reached that point in our exposition of Niebuhr's analysis of human faithlessness, where our radical need of God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ is clearly evident. We have already noted how, as a Christian theologian, Niebuhr presupposes our redemption from sin by the grace of God in Christ. In the next chapter, written from an *evangelical perspective*, we will be looking more closely at these Christological and soteriological aspects. But before doing so, we are required to follow another line of thought in Niebuhr's existential exploration of our human condition.

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<sup>109</sup> Hans W. Frei, 'Niebuhr's Theological Background,' pp. 9-64, in Paul Ramsey, ed., *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, New York, Harper & Row, 1957, p. 16.

<sup>110</sup> HRN, *Faith on Earth*, p. 84.

Thus far, most of our exposition has been based on Niebuhr's essay entitled *Faith on Earth*. This essay has an intriguing history. During the 1950's Niebuhr was extensively engaged in research and writing on the subject of human faith, and as well as numerous articles in journals, and lectures in various educational settings, the main fruit of these labours was the production of two extensive manuscripts. Niebuhr intended these to form two distinct but nonetheless unified aspects of one major book. These manuscripts went under two general headings: *Radical Monotheism*, and *Faith on Earth*. But as Fowler relates, referring in particular to the writings that largely comprised *Faith on Earth*, "[t]he potential publisher failed to grasp the significance and novelty of these chapters. The part of the manuscript dealing with faith as a phenomenon was rejected for publication, while the chapters on "radical monotheism" [in 1960]<sup>111</sup> were accepted."<sup>112</sup>

Fowler's comment is now somewhat dated due to subsequent events. In 1989 the *Faith on Earth* materials were finally edited and published by Niebuhr's son, Richard R. Niebuhr, himself a distinguished contemporary theologian.<sup>113</sup> The point is, however, that a major part of Niebuhr's theological material made its way into the public domain in a somewhat haphazard and unfortunate manner. The intended coherence of his reflections on faith suffered from being subject to a staggered approach with *Radical Monotheism* coming out in 1960, and *Faith on Earth* nearly thirty years later in 1989, some twenty seven years after his death. It was true, of course, that Niebuhr scholars had been given special permission in the interim to study the unpublished *Faith on Earth* materials for themselves, but nonetheless, the convoluted way in which Niebuhr's major essays on faith have been published, has meant that his original and profound contribution to a crucial area of theology has been seriously hampered.

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<sup>111</sup> As HRN, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture with Supplementary Essays*, New York, Harper & Row, 1960.

<sup>112</sup> Fowler, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>113</sup> HRN, *Faith on Earth. An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith*, ed., Richard R. Niebuhr, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989.



So far this chapter has involved an intensive exposition of those parts of *Faith on Earth* which concentrate on the broken faith of the social self where the emphasis has been upon the *self* as it finds itself in the dynamic force-field that constitutes the interpersonal interactions of faith as trust/distrust and loyalty/disloyalty. The emphasis here has been personal but not individualistic.

But before we move to the evangelical turning point as Niebuhr expounds it in the explicitly soteriological part of *Faith on Earth*, a subject which we will deal with in the second section of the next chapter, we need to spend some time considering another important aspect of his existential phenomenology of faith. This distinct but related aspect is what we might call “the *social self*” where a subtle but important shift of emphasis is now placed upon the *social* manifestations or consequences of the self as it lives within the communal web of interpersonal faith interactions. For the relevant material on this aspect of Niebuhr’s work, we thus need to turn to the other part of his faith manuscripts, namely *Radical Monotheism* which was published only two years before his death.<sup>114</sup> We do this in order to demonstrate that our earlier depiction of Niebuhr’s analysis of ‘the *social self*’, also has its corresponding and necessary counterpart in an equally powerful investigation of ‘the *social self*’.

#### 4. The *Misplaced Faith of the Social Self*

Niebuhr begins this line of analysis with a definition of the general human phenomenon of *faith*, a theme which is by now familiar to us:

This is the attitude and action of confidence in, and fidelity to, certain realities as the *sources of value* and *objects of loyalty*. This personal attitude or action is ambivalent; it involves reference to the value that attaches to the self and to the value toward which

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<sup>114</sup> HRN, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture with Supplementary Essays*, New York, Harper & Row, 1960.

the self is directed. On the one hand it is trust in that which gives value to the self; on the other hand it is loyalty to what the self values.<sup>115</sup>

Niebuhr, as we saw earlier on in this chapter, then offers several illustrations of this rather abstract definition of 'faith relationships' among which the friendship between two close companions, and the relationship of a patriotic nationalist to his beloved country are the most prominent examples that he explores.

He suggests that patriotic nationalism represents the more heuristically useful of these two examples in our attempts to understand the faithlessness of the *social* self. Here the mutuality of trust and loyalty is likely to be less pronounced than in the case of friendship between two people. The nationalist relates to his country by relying upon it, often uncritically and unreflectively, as his 'enduring value-center'.<sup>116</sup> However, although the continued existence of the nation does, to some extent, depend on the faithful allegiance of its citizens, it functions as more of a transcendent entity than do any of the individual people who together make it a collective community. Strictly speaking then, the patriotic nationalist thus depends upon, or trusts his country for worth, significance, value and meaning far more than it does upon him.<sup>117</sup>

Enlarging upon this example, and the faith phenomenology that lies behind it, Niebuhr proposes that '[t]he counterpart of trust in the value-center is loyalty or fidelity. Trust is, as it were, the passive aspect of the faith relation. It is expressed in praise or confessed in a creed that states the self-evident principle. Loyalty or faithfulness is the active side. It values the center and seeks to enhance its power and glory. It makes that center its cause for which to live and labour. In this active faith the loyal self organizes its activities and seeks to organize its world. Faith-loyalty, though it use the same words as faith-trust, expresses itself in a *sacramentum*, an oath of fealty, a vow of commitment.'<sup>118</sup> The corollary of this would therefore seem to be 'that selfhood and loyalty go

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 25 for further elaboration of this particular example of nationalism.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

together; that however confused the loyalties of selves may be, yet it is by fidelity that they live no less than by confidence in centers of value which bestow worth on their existence. *Centers of value and causes* may, however, be only two names for *the same objective realities* from which and for which selves live as *valued and valuing beings*.<sup>119</sup>

So far, Niebuhr's analysis has been expressed in very general terms, but now he begins to turn his attention somewhat more in the direction of what we might, with some caution, and with a nervous look over our shoulder to Barth, call "religion". Niebuhr writes:

In ordinary discourse the word "gods" has many meanings. Now we mean by it the powers on which we men call for help in time of trouble; now the forces which they summon up in their search for ecstasy; now the realities before which they experience awe and the sense of the holy; now the beings they posit in their speculative efforts to explain the origin and government of things; now the objects of adoration. The question whether religion in which all these attitudes and activities are present is a single movement of the mind and with it the query whether the word "gods" refers to entities of one class, must be left to other contexts. *We are concerned now with faith as dependence on a value-center and as loyalty to a cause. Hence when we speak of "gods" we mean the gods of faith, namely, such value-centers and causes*.<sup>120</sup>

Niebuhr now develops his argument in an interesting way. He proceeds to identify three distinct forms of faith, all of which demonstrate the phenomenology he has already outlined in general terms, namely, faith as trust in a value centre and loyalty to this value centre's cause. These three forms of faith he names "polytheism", "henotheism" and "radical monotheism". The originality and sheer analytical depth of Niebuhr's essay begin to become apparent in the following paragraph:

In this narrowed sense the plural term "gods" seems alone appropriate. The religious and also the political institutions of the West have long been officially monotheistic, so that we do not easily regard ourselves as polytheists, believers in

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 22. My italics added for emphasis.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 24. My italics.

many gods, or as henotheists, loyal to one god among many. Using the word “god” without definition we regard ourselves as either theists or atheists. But if we confine our inquiry to the forms of faith, then it seems more true to say that monotheism as value dependence and as loyalty to One beyond all the many is in constant conflict among us with the two dominant forms: a pluralism that has many objects of devotion and a social faith that has one object, which is, however, only one among many. If by gods we mean the objects of such faith then atheism seems as irreconcilable with human existence as is radical scepticism in the actuality of the things we eat, and breathe, walk upon and bump into. Atheism in this sense is no more a live alternative for us in actual personal existence, than psychological solipsism is in our physical life. To deny the reality of a supernatural being called God is one thing; to live without confidence in some center of value and without loyalty to a cause is another.<sup>121</sup>

Niebuhr next engages in an exploration of the two forms of ‘false’ or ‘defective’ or ‘inadequate’ faith which are ‘in constant conflict’ with that form of faith which he sees incarnate in Jesus Christ, and which the Church is called to demonstrate in its corporate life, namely, radical monotheism. He writes:

We may begin with henotheism of which the nationalism we previously used to illustrate faith is a characteristic representative. Instead of the nation some smaller social unit – family or tribe or sectarian community – or a larger one – civilization or humanity – may constitute the center of value and the cause of loyalty. In any case, where such faith prevails the ultimate reference in all answers to questions about the meaning of individual life and about the cause for which one lives, is made, in Bergson’s phrase, to some closed society. . [E]very participant in the group derives his value from his position in the enduring life of the community. Here he is related to an actuality that transcends his own, that continues to be though he ceases to exist. He is dependent on it as it is not dependent on him. And this applies even more to his significance than to his existence. The community is not so much his great good as the source and center of all that is good, including his own value. But the society is also his cause; its continuation, power, and glory are the unifying end of all his actions. The standard by which also he knows himself to be judged, is the standard of loyalty to the community.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., pp. 24-25.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 25. Niebuhr has in mind here Henri Bergson’s influential study, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, published in 1932.

Niebuhr names the mid-twentieth century examples of German National Socialism and Italian Fascism as typical representatives of such henotheism, but it also takes many other non-nationalistic forms, such as Marxism and any number of ethnic and sectarian embodiments.<sup>123</sup> My own context of Northern Ireland provides a sad and bitter instance of this, and is probably a major factor in my own attraction to, and appreciation of, Niebuhr's penetrating analysis of human faith in terms of the tragic distortions of social selfhood, with their often destructive and disastrous consequences for communal life. '[O]ur combative human loyalty . . . denies while it seeks to affirm the ultimate loyalty and so involves us in apparently never-ending religious animosities which at the same time unite and divide neighbors, as they forge close bonds of loyalty to each other in a common cause among closed societies disloyal to each other.'<sup>124</sup>

Niebuhr then turns his attention to that other form of false faith which we named earlier as *polytheism*. As the name implies, this is expressed and embodied in numerous ways, and often, though not always, follows the breakdown of a previously held henotheistic or social faith. As Niebuhr puts it:

The great alternative to henotheism with its relative unification of life is pluralism in faith and polytheism among the gods. Historically and in the contemporary scene such pluralism seems most frequently to follow on the dissolution of social faith. When confidence in nation or other closed society is broken, men who must live by faith take recourse to multiple centers of value and scatter their loyalties among many causes. When the half-gods go the minimal gods arrive. Faith in the social value-center may be dissolved in acids produced by many bitter experiences . . . these [erode] the confidence that life is worthwhile as lived from and toward the communal center. The natural, perennial faith of men in the society in which they were born . . . evermore comes to a cheerless end among large and little, conscious and unconscious treasons, or among natural and political disasters, encountered or foreseen. It is in such a situation that

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<sup>123</sup> See, for example, Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History*, London, Pan Books, 2001.

<sup>124</sup> HRN, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, op. cit., p. 37. For a similar perspective based on a different context, see Stephen William Martin, 'Faith Negotiating Loyalties: Exploring South African Christianity Through a Reading of the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr,' Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1999.

man's other faith, polytheism, never wholly suppressed even in the midst of his social loyalties, is likely to become dominant.<sup>125</sup>

What follows next, is Niebuhr's presentation of the shift from henotheism to the various polytheistic alternatives which claim our allegiance, as well as a phenomenological sketch of what generally passes for this type of so-called faith. He writes:

To be sure, among the most critical and most self-conscious men the dissolution of communal faith may call forth an effort to substitute self for society, to make isolated selfhood both value-center and cause. Epicureanism and existentialism exemplify such an effort. . . [These both] look like ghostly survivals of faith among men who, forsaken by the gods, continue to hold on to life. The more common alternative to communal confidence and loyalty appears in that less radical egoism in which an unintegrated diffuse self-system depends for its meanings on many centers and gives its partial loyalties to many interests. This is polytheism whatever mythology accompany the pluralistic faith. In it a break has occurred between the centers of value and the causes which for henotheism were one. Now men look for their worth to various beings, human and superhuman, who value them or from whom by effort they can extract some recognition of value. The old sense that the self is important because it is and exists as part of one enduring community is replaced by the feeling that it is justified in living insofar as it can prove its worth. In times when supernatural beings are thought to regard the actions of men, value dependence becomes a frantic effort to satisfy these gods that the believer is worthy of their attention. When there are no supernatural beings in one's world then the proof of worth must be offered to other humans, to the prestige persons in one's environment. These become the centers of valuation. . . [These] are looked to for assurance of worth, while the self continues to pursue interests of many sorts and gives its fragmented loyalties to many causes.

For as the sources of value are many in polytheism so are the causes. These, however, are no longer realities requiring unified fidelity; they have become interests that from moment to moment attract vagrant potencies in the mind and body.<sup>126</sup>

Niebuhr brings his perceptive analysis of polytheism to a close with the observation, full of prophetic pathos, that '[t]he pluralism of the gods has its

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<sup>125</sup> HRN, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, p. 28.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28-30.

counterpart in the pluralism of self and society. What is valuable in the self is not its being in wholeness or selfhood but the activities, the knowing, creating, loving, worshiping, and directing that issue from it. It has become a bundle of functions tied together by the fibers of the body and the brain. So also the society is an assemblage of associations devoted to many partial interests, held together in meaningful unity by no common derivation from a value-center and by no loyalty to an inclusive cause.<sup>127</sup>

These, admittedly, extensive quotations, have, I believe, demonstrated something of Niebuhr's acute exploration and exposition of the phenomenology of faith in terms of trust in value centres and loyalty to their respective causes. But of course, this has largely involved an exposure of our fallen existence, the faithlessness of the social self. It has therefore been a necessary and illuminating exercise in 'clearing the ground' for a subsequent portrayal of that form of faith which 'is in constant conflict' with henotheism and polytheism, namely radical monotheism, which, for Niebuhr, is understood as trust in, and loyalty to the one, true God revealed in Jesus Christ.

## 5. Niebuhr's Concept of Sin

Our exposition and interpretation of Niebuhr's faith analysis in terms of the phenomenology of human faithlessness would seem to require at least one further question to be explored: what is his concept of sin? A major thrust of this thesis is that Niebuhr's work demonstrates a penetrating grasp of the power and pervasiveness of sin, providing a cluster of insights which are crucial to a proper understanding of human nature, but also setting into sharp relief, the glory of God's redemptive action in Jesus Christ to change this situation for the better.

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., pp. 30-31.

The major source of our reflections in this section will be a paper that Niebuhr devoted specifically to this theme as part of a symposium on the Christian doctrine of man.<sup>128</sup> It ought to be clear that 'the conviction that man is bad is one of the fundamental principles of the Christian interpretation of life. That it is not the only basic dogma need not be said; that it is of essential importance and that its abandonment involves the perversion of the remainder of Christian theology and faith needs to be emphasized.'<sup>129</sup> In saying this, Niebuhr is being careful to put the doctrine of sin in just the right place within the overall scheme of things, theologically construed. Neither comparative neglect nor, for that matter, comparative predominance, are fitting for a properly Christian treatment of this serious, yet, nonetheless, ultimately, subordinate subject matter.

'The importance of the doctrine of human sinfulness is evident from the consequences which flow from its acceptance.' For Niebuhr this 'means that in our dealing with ourselves and with our neighbors, with our societies and our neighbor societies, we deal not with morally and rationally healthy beings who may be called upon to develop ideal personalities and to build ideal commonwealths, but rather with diseased beings, who can do little or nothing that is worth while until they have recovered health and who, if they persist in acting as though they were healthy, succeed only in spreading abroad the infection of their own lives.'<sup>130</sup> There is therefore little room in this Christian perspective for some of the other, less radical notions that are put forward to either explain or address the evil that human beings are prone or prey to, whether that be based on notions of race, class, social standing or the 'romantic' ideal that puts the blame on restrictive institutions, or the evolutionary hypothesis that our imperfection is only a 'cultural lag' in which the blight of immaturity will, at some stage, be alleviated, and eventually, eradicated, by the education of our species out of our unfortunate ignorance.

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<sup>128</sup> HRN, 'Man the Sinner,' *The Journal of Religion* 15 (1935), pp. 272-280. See also Fowler, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-111 for an exposition of the theme of this paper.

<sup>129</sup> HRN, 'Man the Sinner,' p. 272.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 272-273.



Niebuhr concedes that, at first glance, and certainly, to popular perception, the doctrine of human sinfulness may seem to be more pessimistic than the other theories often proposed. On further consideration, however, it can be seen to be 'fundamentally more optimistic.' This is because the 'doctrine of creation is the presupposition of the doctrine of sin' which 'implies that man's fundamental nature, obscured and corrupted though it is, is perfect.' Human perfection as a creature, or, to change the image, restoration to health, is thus 'not a far-off achievement, a more or less remote possibility which future generations may realize after infinite effort; it is rather the underlying datum of life' given God's gracious action in Jesus Christ.<sup>131</sup>

However, the perfection which Niebuhr here refers to, is not simply *moral* perfection, a common mistake, which, he feels, unduly narrows, reduces and distorts the really radical nature of a properly Christian anthropology. 'To say that man is a sinner is not equivalent to the statement that he is morally bad. Modern moralism has subordinated all other value categories to those of the morally good and the morally bad. It has regarded these as somehow final and not in need of further definition, while it has reduced the value categories of truth, beauty and holiness, of intellectual, aesthetic and religious evil to their moral "essence."<sup>132</sup> The result of this widespread reductionism is to conflate the undoubtedly important concept of "moral guilt" but so much so that it seems to hold a kind of 'tyranny' over every area of life. At the same time, the 'concept of God' is, to all intents and purposes, equated or 'identified with' the notion of "moral perfection."<sup>133</sup>

Niebuhr's critique of this common and narrow fallacy is indebted to insights gained from a specifically Christian perspective in which 'sin is not a composite term made up of a moral core and secondary accretions but a true concept which must be understood from the religious and not some other point of view.'<sup>134</sup> For instance, in morality, which is only, finally, one such *relative* point of view, 'reference to a standard is implied, whether that standard be a

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., pp. 273-274.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 274.

code of laws or a table of values. This standard may be called *moral*, but properly it is the standard *of* morality, presupposed by morality' but which is itself, transcended by, dependent on, and derived from, some other reality. 'The source of that standard is always religion, not morality. It depends upon what man finds to be wholly worshipful, intrinsically valuable – in other words, upon the nature of his god or gods. The "chief good" of man is not the object but the presupposition of his moral choices, and his possession of a chief good is the presupposition of all moral judgments which he or another passes upon him.'<sup>135</sup>

Among the targets at which Niebuhr is clearly taking aim here are 'the aberrations of emotional, revivalistic evangelicalism with its "unrealistic" attempts to arouse the sense of sin' so as to then 'create a feeling of assurance' rather than doing what evangelism should properly do, which is to point to sin itself but only in light of the fact that salvation in Christ can be attested to and embraced.<sup>136</sup> But he also states his dissatisfaction with what he also considers to be inadequate interpretations in which the essence of sin is thought to lie in human sensuality or selfishness or even creatureliness. To be sure, each of these viewpoints may name or describe an aspect of our propensity to sin, but none of them are radical or thoroughgoing enough to fully penetrate to the heart of the matter.

Instead, as Niebuhr understands it, the 'religious concept of sin always involves the idea of *disloyalty*, not of disloyalty in general, but of disloyalty to the true God, to the only trustworthy and wholly lovable reality. Sin is the failure to worship God as God.'<sup>137</sup> His argument now unfolds in a way that is consistent with the exposition of the faithlessness of the social self which we presented in the earlier sections of this chapter. This is apparent when he says that sin 'is more than the absence of loyalty to God. It is not possible for men to be simply disloyal; they are always loyal to something. Disloyalty implies a false loyalty and disloyalty to God always includes loyalty to something that is not God but claims deity. Sin therefore is not merely a deprivation, not merely

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., pp. 274-275.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 276.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., pp. 276-277.

the absence of loyalty; it is wrong direction, false worship. Furthermore, loyalty to a false God implies rebellion against God. It is impossible that it should be otherwise, unless God were something less than the Creator and the essence of Being. To make a god of the self, or of the class, or of the nation, or of the phallus, or of mankind, is to organize life around one of these centers and to draw it away from its true center; hence, in a unified world, it is to wage war against God.<sup>138</sup>

The Christian doctrine that the human being is a sinner therefore does not mean that people occasionally become disloyal to God or that their disloyalty may only be considered 'real' in so far as they consciously choose to be disloyal. Instead, it means 'that those to whom God is wholly loyal and who are by nature wholly dependent upon him are in active rebellion against him.' Here, Niebuhr is consciously placing himself in line with the views of Augustine, Luther, Calvin and Edwards, to name but a few, all of whom have held strongly to the Pauline perspective, developed most fully in his letter to the Romans, that the human will is not free to easily or naturally choose the good whose source is in God, but must be first liberated or redeemed.

To the moralist who still wishes to enter the qualification that people can be held accountable for this disloyalty only in so far as they are consciously and willingly disloyal, Niebuhr retorts that this is 'quite beside the point, first of all because Christianity is not primarily concerned with the question of assessing the blame but with the fact and the cure; second, because this qualification rests upon a highly dubious doctrine of freedom. The starting-point of the doctrine of sin is not man's freedom but man's dependence; freedom accounts for the fact that man can be and is disloyal, not for the fact that he ought to be loyal.' In this situation, it may well be that humans will feel a sense of guilt, but what is of greater significance is that they will see their 'disloyalty', their 'false loyalty,' and the consequences, so that such recognition will be an integral moment in the repentance that God requires of us.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p. 277.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

What then are the consequences of the fact that the human being is defined, among other things, as being a sinner? 'The first result of disloyalty appears to be conflict within the individual and within society. It is an inevitable result, for to leave the One is to be scattered among the many.' In the self-enclosed misery in which the human seems to be trapped, loyalty or devotion is offered to many objects other than God, these becoming, in effect, the practical gods or idols of existence, so that 'idolatry leads inevitably to polytheism and polytheism is conflict.'<sup>140</sup> Our earlier exposition on the various examples of henotheism and polytheism come to mind once more. 'A second consequence is death. We are beginning again to become aware of the fact that the death of cultures is the consequence of the sin of social wholes. . . and that "spiritual" death, the disintegration of the self, is the consequence of false loyalties and conflicts.' And thus, in a properly grounded reference to morality, that is, one which takes its bearings from the Christian doctrine of sin, Niebuhr can write that the 'moral consequences of sin – man's inhumanity to man, cruelty to beasts, exploitation of nature, abuse of sex, greed, commercial profanization of creation and its beauty – these are no less patent.'<sup>141</sup>

Of particular importance for the Christian strategy of life is the consequence of man's impotence to rescue himself out of his disloyalty and rebellion, conflict, death, and vice. Moralism which makes the human free will the source of all good and evil cannot understand this impotence. Its savior is the will; every problem is solved by an appeal to the will. But there is no such thing as a free will in this sense. The will is always committed or it is no will at all. It is either committed to God or to one of the gods. "The will is as its strongest motive is." Man cannot transfer his loyalty from one of the false gods to God by exercising his will, since that will is loyal to the false god. Every effort it makes is an effort in some direction. So long as man is loyal to himself, or to his nation, or his class, or to his moral standard based upon a self-chosen highest

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 278.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 279. Note here the reference to the non-human or extra-human dimensions where the beginning of an ecological sensibility comes to the fore. We will devote more attention to this in Chapter 5, Section 4 of this thesis where the emphasis is on Niebuhr's 'larger ecumenism'.

good, his efforts to rescue himself will be determined by his loyalty. The consequence is that he involves himself more deeply in disloyalty to God.<sup>142</sup>

In a sermon published in 1934, when national and international crises were casting a dark shadow on contemporary life, Niebuhr sought to address the urgent question, "What Then Must We Do?" as the kind of cry or plea from those who are in near despair over their complicity in the sin of this suffering world.<sup>143</sup> Niebuhr's answer then, and thereafter, throughout his now fast maturing work, was to respond to this existential anguish by turning to, as he saw it, the only possible source of reliable help: the good news of God's saving action in Jesus Christ. 'Our tragedy and our sin compel us to look again to that segment of history in which sin and tragedy and the God who brings our sin to its tragic and redeeming consequences came to fullest appearance. To believe in the Lord Jesus Christ means many things, but it means this at least, that our faith is based upon no wish nor dream but upon a very bitter reality', namely, 'that we have seen the enemy and the judge of our sin as our redeemer. There are many loud voices today shouting at us to do this and to do that in order that we may be saved. But through all the turmoil the still small voice which bids us to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ carries a conviction with it that these other voices lack. Here is the beginning of our answer. How much more it entails few of us seem prepared to say today. But we wait for the fuller answer.'<sup>144</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

The 'fuller answer' that Niebuhr here refers to, that of God's saving presence and action in Jesus Christ will be the subject of the next chapter, one written from an *evangelical* perspective. But for now, let us offer a brief summary of this first chapter, where the emphasis has been on an exposition and

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 279. The quote within the quote here is from Jonathan Edwards' work *Freedom of the Will*, and, as Fowler comments, appears to be Niebuhr's own paraphrasing of Edwards, see Fowler, op. cit., p. 106.

<sup>143</sup> HRN, 'What Then Must We Do?' *The Christian Century Pulpit* 5 (1934), pp. 145-147.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

interpretation of Niebuhr's work from an *existential* perspective. The word 'existential', like many words or terms used in discourse, whether academic or otherwise, has accrued a wide range of meanings. As applied here to Niebuhr's theology, its main thrust implies an approach to the human being as a living subject in constant interaction with the world or environment in which he or she has been placed. This human or creaturely context sees the human being not so much as an isolated individual but a 'social self', and thus committed to a lifelong process of interpersonal interaction with other selves or agents.

Niebuhr explores this situation of social existentialism primarily in terms of a phenomenological analysis of faith in which the prior bonds of mutual trust and loyalty are broken or misdirected in various ways, not just on the human plane between people as social selves, but more fundamentally still, between the faithless human self and God as attested in the Scriptures of Israel and the Church. This sinful incapacity to trust God at all, or the tendency to rely on some 'trustworthy value centre' or centres other than God, and thus to seek to be loyal to these value centres' associated 'worthwhile common goals', results in the tragedies and sufferings that form such a large part of our personal and political existence. In answer to the urgent and agonized question thus evoked: "what then must we do to be saved?" Niebuhr points to the saving action of God in Jesus Christ since it is by now clear that '[r]edemption from sin is possible only by a reconciliation to God which cannot be initiated by the disloyal creature. Man the sinner is incapable of overcoming his sin.'<sup>145</sup> To a fuller analysis of Niebuhr's treatment of this *evangelical* aspect of his *theologia crucis*, we now turn in the next chapter.

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<sup>145</sup> HRN, 'Man the Sinner,' p. 279.

## Chapter Two: An Evangelical Perspective

### 1. Soteriology: Salvation as the Transformation of Faith

So far we have considered Niebuhr's most distinctive contribution to Christian theology, namely, radical monotheism, from an existential perspective. In the process we have become accustomed to his particular communicative style in which he seeks to engage the reader with something more than mere academic detachment as he searches out many of the deepest realities of our interpersonal being. By now, too, we may have come to appreciate the penetrating insight of his existential exploration, in which some of the most uncomfortable truths about the state of our human nature are exposed and analysed. This has been presented in such a way that we experience it as a shared sense of fallen faithlessness. Each and every one of us is entangled in this web to which we all have, in turn, spun further threads.

We now turn to consider radical monotheism from an *evangelical* perspective. The word 'evangelical' is admittedly one which has a contested meaning, but here it is meant to stand for those central biblical truths which were the focus of renewed emphasis in the mainstream writings of the Reformation, and also the church tradition which subsequently seeks to orientate itself by the same guiding lights. The main topics to be considered here will therefore be those of soteriology, Christology, pneumatology and thus also 'Theology', understood here in the more narrow sense of the doctrine of God. However it should be noted that Niebuhr was not self-consciously a 'doctrinal' thinker. In his autobiographical reflections he wrote that 'important as theological formulations are for me they are not the basis of faith but only one of its expressions and that not the primary one. I discover further a greater kinship with all theologians of Christian experience than with the theologians of Christian doctrine.'<sup>146</sup> Typical of his modernist mentality or neo-Kantian stance, he felt that a heavy emphasis on doctrine led to a theology that was too

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<sup>146</sup> HRN, 'Reformation: Continuing Imperative', op. cit., p. 250.

speculative or 'theoretical', and thus insufficiently attentive to matters of pressing practical importance in the historical sphere where social selves interacted.<sup>147</sup>

These comments are confirmed by an analysis of Niebuhr's writings where one looks in vain for explicit or exhaustive treatment of the usual doctrinal loci that form the core of the work of many other theologians, especially those from a Reformation background. Niebuhr's preference for a particular style of social existentialism which attempts to explore the interpersonal phenomenon of faith marks him out as an intriguing and perhaps, original voice in Christian theology's age-long conversation. However it also means that one has to draw upon many different strands in his corpus in order to bring what tends to be implicit and occasional into something closer to a more structured doctrinal form. That having been said, the posthumous publication of Niebuhr's most sustained and coherent reflections on faith in *Faith on Earth*, now allows us to offer a more thorough exposition, examination and evaluation of the saving significance of God in Christ.

In the first chapter, in which we looked at radical monotheism from an *existential* perspective, we made use of the term *the social self* to describe Niebuhr's distinctive anthropology in which he studies the phenomenon of faith. We saw something of his unique and almost seamless interweaving of theological and sociological insights in which he demonstrates the depth, persistence and pathos of the universal human tendency to faithlessness in its myriad forms. 'There is no escape from life in faith and no escape from an existence in which all trust and faithfulness is malformed by distrust and treason.'<sup>148</sup>

It may be recalled when we examined the faithlessness of the social self from an existential perspective that we analysed, in turn, two distinct emphases. We looked first of all at the faithlessness of 'the social self' in which the internal structure of the trust-loyalty bond was seen to be twisted, distorted or fractured; in Niebuhr's own preferred terminology, this is the 'broken faith' of

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> HRN, *Faith on Earth*, p. 85.



the person. He explores this with penetrating insight in chapter five of *Faith on Earth*. In turning now to the *evangelical* perspective which corresponds with this way of looking at faithlessness, we propose to categorise the saving transformation of Jesus Christ under the heading: 'The *Reconstruction* of the *Social Self's Broken Faith*'. The emphasis here is on the faith phenomenon of the believing person, understood in each instance as a unique individual, but without falling prey to the atomistic distortions of rampant individualism. The major problem here is that the social self has difficulty in believing *at all* since its trust has seemingly been undermined or broken in various ways; and so, with this lack of confidence comes a deep-seated existential estrangement from God, others, self and the environing world.

Secondly, our earlier existential analysis also looked at the faithlessness of 'the *social self*' in which the more explicitly communitarian aspects of this phenomenon were explored. The subtle shift of emphasis that occurs here is to look more at the *social* connections and thus the associated consequences of placing one's trust in specific 'value centres' and attempting to be loyal to certain 'common causes'. The almost inescapable tendency of human beings to live out the many varied forms of what Niebuhr calls 'henotheism' and 'polytheism' was very evident in this earlier exposition. As Niebuhr understands it, the saving transformation accomplished by Jesus Christ is to redirect people so that they put their trust in God as the true 'value centre' and thus seek to be loyal to all existents in the kingdom of God in which the 'common cause' is a universal one, namely, the redemption of all things in the divine commonwealth. The gospel calls us to participate in this mission which has been uniquely and decisively inaugurated by Jesus Christ. In this instance we will categorise this way of considering the saving work of God in Christ under the heading: 'The *Redirection* of the *Social Self's Misplaced Faith*'. A crucial textual resource here is the second chapter of Niebuhr's *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* in which he describes the kind of changes involved in moving from henotheism and/or polytheism to radical monotheism as embodied in, and inspired by, Jesus Christ. The major problem here would appear to be that the social self submits too easily to the predominant 'powers

that be' in the particular context in which it lives, whether these 'powers' be the 'idols' or 'ideologies' or 'mores' or 'spirits' of the age.

## 2. The *Reconstruction of Broken Faith*

At what can clearly be identified as the evangelical 'turning point' of *Faith on Earth* Niebuhr writes as follows:

Though there is no escape from life in faith, so disordered, into life without faith, there is a prospect of salvation from diseased faith. There is a prospect that this vast and complex disease in interpersonal existence will be healed. More than that, there is the assurance that a new promise, namely the promise of healing, will be kept. This is the prospect and this is the promise of which Christians speak. This is the New Covenant, which is not a substitute for the old promise given with life but is based upon it, yet so that it is not only the reinforcement of what we once believed but the answer to our disbelief of the first promise.<sup>149</sup>

This New Covenant can be found in such historical realities as 'Christianity' or the 'churches', but Niebuhr is frankly rather wary, indeed highly sceptical, of identifying such faithfulness with these abstract or institutional entities. For him it 'is rather the interpersonal movement of faith that centers in the person of Jesus Christ; yet in such a way that he directs all trust and loyalty away from himself to the Transcendent and Circumambient. . . In this interpersonal life Jesus Christ is. . . the personal companion who by his loyalty to the self and by his trust in the Transcendent One *reconstructs* the broken interpersonal life of faith. . . As such, not as the founder of a religion, but as person among persons he carries on a work of salvation 'by faith unto faith,' the work of making us whole in our faith relations.'<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> HRN, *Faith on Earth*, p. 85.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87. This is a good example of Niebuhr's tendency to keep the emphases of Barth and Schleiermacher in dialectical tension or relationship within his own theology: the two terms used of God or the Divine Mystery, namely 'Transcendent' and 'Circumambient' hint at the theologies of Barth and Schleiermacher respectively.

In due course we shall examine the Christology which implicitly belongs with Niebuhr's exposition here, and also as we find it elsewhere in his writings, but for the moment we shall continue to follow the specifically soteriological line of argument which he is presenting us with in *Faith on Earth*. For Niebuhr, Jesus Christ is the 'acknowledged companion' or 'present companion'<sup>151</sup> who embodies and represents 'the principle of faithfulness'<sup>152</sup> as this is mediated to us by others who have trusted in him in trusting God, and who have sought to be loyal to him and to his cause – the cause of universal redemption.

The striking feature of this Jesus Christ of our history is his faith and the striking feature of his fate is his betrayal. His faith has the three aspects which we have discovered in analysing the structure of faith in interpersonal relations, with this marked difference that the cause to which he is loyal is the rule of the absolutely Transcendent One. His faith is first of all the faith of trust in the Lord of heaven and earth . . . as One who has bound himself to care for the apparently most despised beings, human and animal and vegetable in his creation. He trusts in the loyalty of the Transcendent One and in his power, being certain in his mind that nothing can separate men from the love of God. . . . With this completeness of trust in God as wholly loyal, without the least deceptiveness in his nature, the Jesus Christ of our history combines complete loyalty to men. He does not trust his fellowmen but he is wholly faithful to them, even or perhaps particularly when he chastises them for their disloyalty to each other and their distrust of God. He seeks and saves the lost. He spends himself for others – and always with trust in God. As person, as living in faith, this Jesus Christ is Son of God.<sup>153</sup>

Niebuhr is quite prepared to confess the divinity of Jesus Christ, but as we will have cause to see throughout our thesis, his normal procedure is to approach this character variously labelled as 'God's Son' and our 'Saviour' more by means of his faithful humanity. 'It is the personal relation of a faithful, trusting loyal soul to the source of its being which is the astonishing thing. This is a superhuman thing according to all our experience of humanity. Yet this is

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<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

humanity in idea, in essence. This, we say, as we regard him, is what we might be if we were not the victims and the perpetrators of treason and distrust.<sup>154</sup>

This personal miracle of the existence of a man of complete faith, of universal trust and loyalty, is conceivable. He is conceivable as the abnormal possibility of our normal human existence in negative faith. We do not doubt our fellowmen when they tell us of the loyalty of Jesus Christ. We are not inclined to believe that they are deceiving us. What we doubt is not the possibility of such goodness; but we are sceptical of its power – not of the miracle of goodness, for we somehow see that the appearance of such loyalty and trust is not in contradiction of the laws of personal existence. It is rarely suggested that the goodness of Jesus Christ is mythological invention.<sup>155</sup>

But of course it is not just the faith of Jesus Christ himself which is remarkable. What is even more striking is the fact that such a one as this, one who lived by such undiminished trust and loyalty should suffer the fate that he did. As the great evangelical emphasis affirms, it is in the passion of Jesus Christ that deeper truths emerge about the nature of God, about ourselves and how they are inter-related. Niebuhr emphasises that ‘the Jesus Christ whom we remember was the subject of betrayal. His trust in God was profoundly distrusted as an attitude dangerous to the existence of his nation, of its cause as the people of God, of its leaders, its worship, its laws. This confidence in the loyalty of God is suspected as something which is demonic. This loyalty to all men. . . is seen as dangerous to all treasured values. He is distrusted in his trust in God and in his loyalty to God and to God’s creatures. Again we discover that the story of Jesus Christ’s betrayal is easy to accept.’<sup>156</sup> Given what we have learned about the perennial faithlessness of human beings, it is probably only to be expected, indeed, almost inevitable, that Jesus Christ should be distrusted and betrayed as the New Testament shows. Niebuhr then pauses, in order to pose some speculative alternatives about what we might have wanted or expected to happen in the narrative concerning Jesus:

If ever there was an opportunity in human history for the reconstruction of faith, for the self-disclosure of the Incomprehensible Transcendent Source of being as God, as

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., pp. 95-96.

wholly loyal to his creation, as redeemer of all the promises given with the gift of existence itself, then it was at this point where faith in him became incarnate. But the faith of Jesus Christ came to the end of its historic existence with the cry: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" There was faith in the cry: "My God!" But it is the uttermost cry of faith, at the edge of nothingness. If at this point in the central tragedy in our history there had occurred the demonstration of the power and glory of the God in whom he trusted; if Elijah had come; if he who saved others had been saved; if we know not what natural or supernatural event had taken place to deliver this soul of faith from death and further shame; then might not faith as universal loyalty and universal trust have been reconstructed among men?<sup>157</sup>

Niebuhr's rhetorical strategy is an attempt to articulate those sorts of questions which any sensitive person is almost bound to ask when confronted with the passion accounts of Jesus Christ. Could not something have happened or been done to vindicate his faithfulness, and thus to reconstruct the broken bonds of our faithlessness? Niebuhr interrupts and answers such a train of thought:

This did not happen. In our distrust we should not expect it to have happened. Should the Son of God come again, it would not happen. But something else has happened; something that is very ordinary and very strange, something over which we wonder. In consequence of the coming of this Jesus Christ to us we are able to say in the midst of our vast distrust, our betraying and being betrayed, our certainty of death and our temptations to curse our birth: "Abba, our Father." And this we say to the Ground of Being, to the mystery out of which we come, to the power over our life and death. "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name" (Matt. 6:9-12; Luke 11:2-4). "I believe, help thou mine unbelief" (Mark 9:24).<sup>158</sup>

The 'something else' to which Niebuhr is alluding is, of course, the 'resurrection' of Jesus Christ. This, so far as we know, unprecedented event, is to be seen as part of the entire 'Christ-event' in which the life, passion, death *and resurrection and ascension* of this completely faithful person, is the expression of his being vindicated by the transcendent faithfulness of God.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., pp. 96-97.

<sup>159</sup> For a helpful typology of various views on the resurrection see George Hunsinger, 'The Daybreak of a New Creation: Christ's Resurrection in Recent Theology,' *Scottish Journal of*

But in evangelical perspective it is both the death *and* resurrection of Jesus Christ which *together* reveal that God is our reconciler and redeemer: or as Niebuhr puts it in the terminology of his particular interpretation – the reconstruction of our broken faith. In a summary statement from another manuscript, Niebuhr attests that ‘Jesus Christ going to crucifixion and ignominy is the revelation of human faithfulness, of its possibility. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the demonstration of the faithfulness of God, by which the distrust of man is broken and his trust in the power and goodness, that is loyalty of God [is] called forth.’<sup>160</sup>

It seems most strange that by that recollection which we have of the betrayal and the disastrous end of the one who trusted in the Power of Being as utterly faithful to him, we should have introduced into our lives a little ability to trust. It seems most strange that when the one who had heard and believed the promise of life given to him – “Thou art my beloved Son”- that when this one had the promise of life cancelled – that then we should in the recollection of this one believe that his God is indeed our Father, that his Father is the Determiner of our Destiny. This is the resurrection of Christ which we experience. In and through his betrayal, denial and forsakenness, we are given the assurance that God keeps his promises. In and through and despite this we hear him, we read him, we accept him as God’s word to us that God is faithful and true, that he does not desire the death of the sinner, that he is leading his kingdom to victory over all evil, that we shall not die but live, that the last word to us is not death without ending, but life everlasting.<sup>161</sup>

Niebuhr’s exposition here is tightly packed and closely argued. Consequently, it is perhaps best appreciated by quoting from it extensively, as we have done so, since there is much in it which shows fresh insight into the meaning and significance of ‘Easter’. Another important point to note is that Niebuhr’s interpretation involves a particular way of interweaving both soteriological and christological insights thus making it difficult to separate

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*Theology*, 57, 2 (2004), pp. 163-181. Of the three types suggested, namely the ‘spiritual way’ (Schleiermacher, Bultmann, Tillich); the ‘historical way’ (Pannenberg, NT Wright); and the ‘eschatological way’ (Moltmann, Frei, Barth), Niebuhr *possibly* comes closest to the ‘spiritual way’ though he is, as ever, not neatly classifiable. For more on the relatively neglected theme of the ascension see Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1999.

<sup>160</sup> HRN, ‘The Mediation of Faith,’ unpublished handwritten manuscript from the 1950’s, p. 21.

<sup>161</sup> HRN, *Faith on Earth*, p. 97.

them out completely, though it is desirable to distinguish them for the purpose of our present analysis. Reflecting further on the effect upon us of the 'Christ-event' as it centres on the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, Niebuhr writes:

In our relation to this betrayed, forsaken, destroyed and powerful Jesus Christ we are enabled to qualify our distrust of the Ground of Being so that we pray to the mystery out of which we come and to which we return, "Our Father who art in heaven." Jesus Christ, we say, reveals God. What we can mean by that does not seem to be what certain theologians seem to think, that apart from Jesus Christ we do not acknowledge God at all, for we do acknowledge him with perhaps all of our human companions in the distrust manifest in fear, hostility and evasion; yet we do not acknowledge him as God, as the supreme object of our devotion, as the faithful one in whom we trust, as the one in whose kingdom we are bound to loyalty to all our fellow citizens in creation. There is an acknowledgement even of the personal element in the Ultimate in this distrust and anxiety of ours. But it is perverted faith. What appears to happen in fellowship with Jesus Christ to our life of faith is that our distrust of God is turned somewhat in the direction of trust, that our hostility is turned slightly in the direction of a desire to be loyal, that our view of the society to which we are bound begins to enlarge. The thunderclouds on the horizon of our existence are broken; the light begins to shine through. A great metanoia, a revolution of the personal life, begins in us and in human interpersonal history.<sup>162</sup>

As ever, with Niebuhr, the main focus is on the consequences to the life of faith as it presupposes the 'evangelical turning point' of God's saving work in Jesus Christ. 'We may describe what happens to faith by saying that the two great problems of existence are solved at least in principle. The first of these is the problem of the goodness of Power. The great anxiety of life, the great distrust, appears in the doubt that the Power whence all things come, the Power which has thrown the self and its companions into existence, is not good. The question is always before us, Is Power good? Is it good to and for what it has brought into being? Is it good with the goodness of integrity? Is it good as

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., p. 99. This is a profound and moving instance, though only one of many in his entire corpus, where Niebuhr's distinctive *theologia crucis* is evident. As has been stated earlier, this is not simply a theory of the atonement but also an entire disposition, 'spirituality' or way of life. The unfolding of my argument in the rest of this thesis will help to emphasise this point. The representative theologian whom Niebuhr criticises would appear to be Barth, though whether the critique is fully sustainable is debatable. It is interesting, however, how often Niebuhr feels the need to distinguish his own position vis-à-vis Barth.

adorable and delightful? On the other hand we know something of what true goodness is. We recognize goodness in every form of loyalty and love. But our second great problem is whether goodness is powerful, whether it is not forever defeated in actual existence by loveless, thoughtless power. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, the establishment of Jesus Christ in power, is at one and the same time the demonstration of the power of goodness and the goodness of power.<sup>163</sup>

Here we have, what is in effect, Niebuhr's response to the theodicy question. For him, it is as if everything hinges on the resurrection of the crucified Christ, for without this 'mysterious' and 'miraculous' event, there would be little, if anything, to demonstrate that human faithfulness is in harmony with, or vindicated by, the faithfulness of a trustworthy, loving, loyal and powerful God. One also notes the heavy strain of existentialism that is very evident throughout Niebuhr's reflections. Ever sensitive to the suffering, the doubts and the tendency to faithlessness in our shared human nature, he writes in a manner which bears the unmistakable stamp of personal experience and authenticity, though refraining from becoming too autobiographical. Perhaps this makes it all the more persuasive as an exemplar of what human testimony should be: a pointing towards, and exploration of, an objective truth, which in its interpersonal nature, also brings about profound subjective change for good. Specifically, in Niebuhrian terms, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is confessed as the reconstruction of the social self's hitherto broken faith.

### **3. The *Redirection of Misplaced Faith***

Niebuhr's work can be described as an analysis of the interpersonal interaction of the social self, particularly as we find this manifesting itself in the phenomenology of faith where trust and loyalty are the reciprocal bonds whereby human beings relate to each other and to God. In the previous section,

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., p. 100.



where we leant heavily on Niebuhr's essay *Faith on Earth*, we were especially concerned with the personal agent as an individual in whom the saving work of Jesus Christ enabled a reconstruction of its previously broken faith in God; in particular as a restoring of trust or confidence in the face of previous disappointments and doubt.

Now, in this section, we are concerned more with the ways in which the phenomenon of faith, understood primarily as trust and loyalty, or its synonyms of confidence and fidelity, manifests itself in the attitudes, actions and associations of the *social* self in the communal sphere in which it inevitably exists. Our chief interest will be in how Niebuhr traces the kinds of saving transformation which Jesus Christ brings about in terms of redirecting the social self's *misdirected* faith. Niebuhr understands this as a transfer of devotion from one 'value centre' to another, together with its associated 'common cause'. In 'henotheism' or idolatrous faith, there is a distinction made between an 'in-group' and an 'out-group' whereby the social self only seeks fellowship or works for the well-being of those deemed to be 'insiders'. In radical monotheism, however, the faith of Jesus Christ himself, and thus the form of faith which the community of Jesus Christ is called to demonstrate, there is no distinction between a so-called 'in-group' and 'out-group'. Rather, God is the one, true value centre whose cause is that of universal redemption, and therefore this becomes the common cause of all who espouse Christ-like faith. Our exposition here will follow closely the argument which Niebuhr presents in chapter two of *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*.

In the previous chapter, we saw how Niebuhr offered a searching analysis and critique of two pervasive but aberrant forms of faith, namely, henotheism and polytheism. This was, in effect, a necessary yet illuminating exercise in 'clearing the ground' for a portrayal of something much more positive, indeed, redemptive: that new or alternative form of faith to which he gives the descriptive label 'radical monotheism'. He introduces this more constructive part of his argument as follows:

There is a third form of human faith with which we are acquainted in the West, more as hope than as datum, more perhaps as a possibility than as an actuality, yet also an actuality that has modified at certain emergent periods our natural social faith and our polytheism. In all the times and areas of our Western history this faith has struggled with its rivals, without becoming triumphant save in passing moments and in the clarified intervals of personal existence.<sup>164</sup>

Niebuhr is not suggesting that this form of faith has only occurred in the Western world, it is simply that he does not feel qualified to speak about the phenomenology of faith in Eastern cultures, and so confines his analysis to those areas he is more familiar with through experience and research. He now begins to unfold his argument, informing us that though he will here describe it in rather formal or abstract terms, that in fact, it does not appear 'otherwise than as embodied in the concreteness of communal and personal, of religious and moral existence.'<sup>165</sup> He writes:

For radical monotheism the value-center is neither closed society nor the principle of such a society but the principle of being itself; its reference is to no one reality among the many but to One beyond all the many, whence all the many derive their being, and by participation in which they exist. As faith, it is reliance on the source of all being for the significance of the self and of all that exists. It is the assurance that because I am, I am valued, and because you are, you are beloved, and because whatever is has being, therefore it is worthy of love. It 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. In Him we live and move and have our being not only as existent but as worthy of existence and worthy in existence. It is not a relation to any finite, natural or supernatural, value-center that confers value on self and some of its companions in being, but it is value relation to the One to whom all being is related. Monotheism is less than radical if it makes a distinction between the principle of being and the principle of value; so that while all being is acknowledged as absolutely dependent for existence on the One, only some beings are valued as having worth for it; or, if speaking in religious language, the Creator and the God of grace are not identified.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> HRN, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, p. 31.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

It has been necessary to quote this long paragraph in its entirety since its tightly woven argument is crucial to the interpretation of Niebuhr that I offer. The main point of the paragraph, and the others that will soon follow, is to separate out the various distinct strands of a complex and nuanced reality about the phenomenology of faith in its three basic forms, and to do so in such a way that the singular or unique, yet universal nature of radical monotheism is more precisely analysed, articulated and appreciated. It is this combination of a unity which is theocentric, coupled with an inclusivity which is in fact nothing less than universal in intent, which is particularly noteworthy in Niebuhr's interpretation of faith. This interpretive interweaving of unity and universality underlies the following paragraph where Niebuhr writes:

As faith reliance, radical monotheism depends absolutely and assuredly for the worth of the self on the same principle by which it has being; and since that principle is the same by which all things exist it accepts the value of whatever is. As faith loyalty, it is directed toward the principle and the realm of being as the cause for the sake of which it lives. Such loyalty on the one hand is claimed by the greatness and inclusiveness of the objective cause; on the other hand it is given in commitment, since loyalty is the response of a self and not the compulsive reaction of a thing. The cause also has a certain duality. On the one hand it is the principle of being itself, on the other, it is the realm of being. Whether to emphasize the one or the other may be unimportant, since the principle of being has a cause, namely, the realm of being, so that loyalty to the principle of being must include loyalty to its cause; loyalty to the realm of being, on the other hand, implies keeping faith with the principle by virtue of which it is, and is one realm.<sup>167</sup>

The language that Niebuhr employs throughout this argument might appear, at first reading, to be couched in a rather dry, abstract and philosophical style, but what it actually conveys, on closer inspection, is a precise yet passionate description of radical monotheism. What begins to emerge is that this form of faith makes possible an ethos that is both magnificent in scope and magnanimous in spirit. The following paragraph, long, subtle and nuanced as it is, continues the marvellous exposition that Niebuhr unfolds:

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

The counterpart, then, of universal faith assurance is universal loyalty. Such universal loyalty cannot be loyalty to loyalty, as Royce would have it, but is loyalty to all existents as bound together by a loyalty that is not only resident in them but transcends them. It is not only their loyalty to each other that makes them one realm of being, but the loyalty that comes from beyond them, that originates and maintains them in their particularity and their unity. Hence universal loyalty expresses itself as loyalty to each particular existent in the community of being and to the universal community. Universal loyalty does not express itself as loyalty to the loyal but to whatever is; not as reverence for the reverent but as reverence for being; not as the affirmation of world affirmers but as world affirmation.<sup>168</sup>

We pause at this stage in our citation of the rest of Niebuhr's paragraph in order to point up the fact that this universal faith stance, understood in radically monotheistic terms as trust in the One God, and thus loyalty to all that exists within the universal realm of his kingdom or commonwealth, can be distinguished, in typically Niebuhrian fashion, from the other forms of faith, and their inherent moralities, in ways that are deeply instructive. Speaking of the loyalty that is involved in radical monotheism, Niebuhr's paragraph continues thus:

Such loyalty gives form to morality, since all moral laws and ends receive their form, though not their immediate content, from the form of faith reliance and faith loyalty. Love of the neighbor is required in every morality formed by a faith; but in polytheistic faith the neighbor is defined as the one who is near me in my interest group, *when* he is near me in that passing association. In henotheistic social faith my neighbor is my fellow in the closed society. Hence in both instances the counterpart of the law of neighbor-love is the requirement to hate the enemy. But in radical monotheism my neighbor is my companion in being; though he is my enemy in some less than universal context the requirement is to love him. To give to everyone his due is required in every context; but what is due to him depends on the relation in which he is known to stand.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., pp. 33-34.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid. p. 34.

By now the idea and actuality of radical monotheism should be clear. However, to illustrate its continuing struggle with, and distinctiveness from, the other forms of 'defective' faith that Niebuhr has identified for us, he now throws radical monotheism into even sharper relief over against them. He writes:

The meaning of radical monotheism may be further clarified if we compare it with some of the nonradical, mixed forms of faith in which it seems to appear in disguised or broken fashion. Something like monotheism is present in henotheism at those points in personal or social life where a closed society fills the whole horizon of experience, where it is in fact not yet a closed society because everything that comes into view is a part of it. But as soon as an in-group and out-group are distinguished and as soon as the contingency of the society, as not self-existent but as cast into existence, is brought to consciousness, such embryonic radical monotheism is put to the test. Though the possibility of a movement toward conscious radical monotheism may be present in such a moment, the apparently invariable process in human history at such points leads toward closed-society faith or toward polytheism or toward both.<sup>170</sup>

Niebuhr's next move in this cumulative argument, one which has been gathering momentum as it goes along, is to cite certain types of henotheism, analysing them in the light of, and comparing them against, radical monotheism. The representative examples that he explores, and all of which he ultimately finds wanting, are humanism, naturalism and Albert Schweitzer's celebrated philosophy of 'reverence for life'. These all demonstrate signs or traits of generosity of spirit and inclusiveness of belonging, but at some point or other, each one fails to live up to the theocentric logic and ethos of radical monotheism. Bringing this particular part of his argument to a finish, Niebuhr offers two short summary paragraphs which are a fitting culmination to his foregoing interpretative reflections:

All such ways of faith seem, at least as protests, to be movements in the direction of radical monotheism. Yet they all fall short of the radical expression; each excludes some realm of being from the sphere of value; each is claimed by a cause less inclusive than the realm of being in its wholeness.

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid., pp. 34-35.

Radical monotheism 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."<sup>171</sup>

Niebuhr next briefly examines how radical monotheism was 'in constant conflict' with polytheism and henotheism throughout the Old Testament rendering of the history of Israel. He suggests that the Hebrew writer who perhaps gave the greatest and most consistent expression to this was the so-called 'Second Isaiah' (Isaiah 40-55).<sup>172</sup> However, as a Christian theologian, it is in the Jesus of the New Testament that Niebuhr finds the supreme, perhaps even unique, incarnation and mediation of radical monotheism, though the continuities with the theology of Second Isaiah should be noted. Jesus came among us to inaugurate and communicate the coming kingdom of God, this latter phrase being understood in characteristic Niebuhrian terms as 'both the rule that is trusted and the realm to which loyalty is given.'<sup>173</sup> In Jesus, we have 'the concrete expression in a total human life of radical trust in the One and of universal loyalty to the realm of being.'<sup>174</sup>

But lest anyone imagine that he is advocating a vague or sentimental faith, such as might be suggested or presupposed by the soft pan-universalism of say nineteenth century liberalism, encapsulated in the phrase 'the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man', Niebuhr goes on to articulate his reading of the perennial cost that radical monotheism entails, given the contested nature of human history and contemporary existence:

To say that this faith acknowledges whatever is to be good is not to say, of course, that for it whatever is, is right. In their relations to each other and to their principle these many beings in the realm of being are often wrong and grievously so. They are

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>172</sup> Note the strong affinities with Brueggemann who also gives 'a privileged place' in his interpretation to Second Isaiah, see Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1997, p. 120. Niebuhr used to quip that he read Second Isaiah so much that his bible fell open there when set down on its spine.

<sup>173</sup> HRN, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

enemies to each other as often as friends; but even enemies are entitled to loyalty as fellow citizens of the realm of being.<sup>175</sup>

What the foregoing exposition and interpretation has, I believe, demonstrated, is that Niebuhr's analysis of the phenomenology of faith is not just plausible but persuasive as a *theologia crucis*. That unified complex of events which, according to the New Testament, centre on Jesus Christ, attest to the good news that in and through him the transformation of the faithlessness of the social self into faithfulness has been effected, both in terms of the reconstruction of its broken faith, as well as the redirection of its misplaced faith. In Niebuhrian terminology, soteriology is here designated as the saving significance of Jesus Christ, whose radical monotheism brings about 'pistological' transformation within and among the fallen and distorted faith structures of human beings. In order to further explore this evangelical perspective, the next section of this chapter will go on to deal more with some of the Christological issues that it prompts. In other words, we now shift our primary focus from the 'work' to the 'person' of Christ.

#### **4. Christology: Jesus as the Incarnation and Mediator of Faith**

Lonnie Kliever has remarked that 'H. Richard Niebuhr is seldom thought of as a christologist.' Often the target for criticism due to his alleged 'christological inadequacy', his work, however, 'though rejecting all christocentrism . . . is decisively christological. His entire theological program pivots on a Christology which holds together God's radical sovereignty and graciousness with man's radical historicity and sinfulness. Unfortunately, Niebuhr offers no systematic statement on God's revelation and reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ. But the structure for a fully developed Christology can be drawn and systematized from his writings.'<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>176</sup> Lonnie D. Kliever, 'The Christology of H. Richard Niebuhr,' *The Journal of Religion*, 50, (1970) pp. 33-57, p. 33.

Kliever's point is well taken. Niebuhr does not offer a fully developed Christology, perhaps in part due to his reluctance to be a self-consciously 'doctrinal' theologian, operating primarily in a highly technical mode.<sup>177</sup> Niebuhr's work, as we suggested earlier in this thesis, is more like 'sapientia' than 'scientia', and thus fits more into Barth's category of 'irregular dogmatics', as distinct from the 'regular dogmatics' which Barth himself eventually felt called to as his life's work.<sup>178</sup> Nonetheless, there is, as Kliever and others have noted, and as I argue too, a genuinely coherent christological structure to Niebuhr's theology,<sup>179</sup> which though not without some unresolved problems and tensions, does have certain persuasive features and offers the promise of further development in this most crucial of doctrinal loci. Indeed, Kliever himself has done much to elucidate Niebuhr's theology, and in particular the evangelical interconnections of his Christology and soteriology. This is all the more noteworthy when one considers the fact that at the time when Kliever was engaged in his research and writing he did not have available to him, indeed may not even have been aware of, the important manuscript *Faith on Earth* which was only published in 1989. My own thesis, having the benefit of this latter publication, is able to confirm much of Kliever's systematizing of Niebuhr's evangelical interpretation, as well as grounding it more concretely in an extensive exposition of *Faith on Earth*, providing, as this posthumous book does, probably the most sustained and explicit soteriological/christological work in Niebuhr's entire corpus.

A helpful and possibly illuminating way in which to approach the question of Niebuhr's Christology in relation to his soteriology, is to consider the manner in which Bruce Marshall addresses the interaction of these two important doctrinal loci. As Marshall puts it :

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<sup>177</sup> HRN, 'Reformation: Continuing Imperative,' op. cit., pp. 250; 251; HRN, *Faith on Earth*, p. 102.

<sup>178</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1956-1975, VI, pp. 275-280.

<sup>179</sup> Hans Frei, 'The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr,' in *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, Paul Ramsey, ed., New York, Harper and Row, 1957, pp. 104-116; Libertus A. Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, Philadelphia, Pilgrim Press, 1970, pp. 114-126; John D. Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr*, Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott, 1970, pp. 96-115.



There seem to be two basically different and contrary ways in which the question “How can Jesus Christ be significant for salvation?” might be answered. One way would be to say that what makes Jesus Christ *heilsbedeutsam* [significant for salvation] is his own life, passion and death and resurrection, so that both the meaning and meaningfulness of “that which is significant for salvation” are determined by and inseparable from his particularity. On this account, since Jesus is *heilsbedeutsam* precisely in virtue of the actions and events which make him a particular person, principally his death and resurrection, recognizing him as the particular person he is is the one logically indispensable condition of the possibility of knowing him to be *heilsbedeutsam*, that is, of faith in him as redeemer. This position need not shun the question of how faith in Jesus Christ as the unique redeemer is credible; but it insists that because of the way in which Jesus Christ is *heilsbedeutsam*, this question can in the final analysis only be answered by appeal to Jesus as a particular person, and hence by appeal to an identifying description of him. On this account, therefore, the “credibility” question – the question of how faith in Jesus Christ is possible – cannot be answered by an appeal to general criteria of religious meaningfulness or significance for salvation. On the contrary, an adequate description of Jesus Christ is the logical basis of any answer to the question of how he can be significant for salvation; the task of theology in this respect is to elucidate conceptually the way in which significance for salvation is determined by and dependent on Jesus Christ as a particular person.

A different way of answering this question of credibility would be to say that in order to show how Jesus Christ can be *heilsbedeutsam*, it must be possible to show how there can be *anything at all* which is *heilsbedeutsam*. That is, on this account one must show how it can be meaningful (*sinnvoll*) and intelligible (*verständlich*) to say that any reality is significant for salvation. Here, appeal to a description of Jesus Christ is taken to be insufficient as a basis for an explanation of how he can be *heilsbedeutsam*, although such a description is of course a necessary part of a complete account of Christian faith in Jesus as the unique redeemer. On the contrary, the general question of the credibility of that which is putatively *heilsbedeutsam* is separate and independent of the question of how the status of unique significance for salvation can be ascribed to Jesus Christ as a particular person. Unless the possibility of something “significant for salvation” can be shown to be credible, a belief like “Jesus Christ is the unique savior” will not be credible, even though a demonstration that there can be realities which are *heilsbedeutsam* does not alone fully account for the credibility of faith in Jesus Christ. Both questions must be answered in order to show how Jesus

Christ can be significant for salvation; neither response by itself constitutes an adequate answer to the basic question of credibility.<sup>180</sup>

The specific issue at stake for Marshall in the foregoing reflections is to try and test both of the above Christological methodologies as found in Barth and Rahner respectively, where Barth represents the first method and Rahner the second. Marshall's study argues a persuasive case for the former method in which Jesus Christ is deemed to be both "logically indispensable" and "materially decisive".<sup>181</sup>

Subsequently, George Hunsinger has developed Marshall's thesis in an interesting manner. For Hunsinger, Marshall's insights become a useful means by which to distinguish between what Hunsinger calls "middle" and "high" Christologies.<sup>182</sup> Not only so, but it also becomes possible to draw similar distinctions between various soteriologies too. In a so-called "high conception" of the person and work of Jesus Christ, such as found, for example, in Barth or von Balthasar, '[t]he *work* of Christ is regarded as *materially decisive*, because it brings about our *reconciliation* with the God toward whom we as sinners are *hostile* and by whom we stand otherwise *condemned*. A high view of Christ's *person* is *logically indispensable* to this work, because it is inconceivable that a *mere human being*, no matter how fully actualized in no matter what transcendental a way, could accomplish this work.' For this conception, therefore, '[o]nly a *particular person* who was at once truly God and yet also truly human could do a work of this kind. Both the person and the work are *exclusively unique*. Christ dies in our place. He enacts both the mercy and the righteousness of God through *vicarious expiatory suffering*. This *enactment* is as *ineffable* as it is *real*. It views our sin as *radical evil*, and yet saves us from its *penalty* by bearing it and bearing it away.'<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Bruce D. Marshall, *Christology in Conflict: The Identity of a Savior in Rahner and Barth*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1987, pp. 21-22.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 76-106 for Rahner's alleged inconsistencies and inadequacies and pp. 115-150 for Barth's more satisfactory treatment.

<sup>182</sup> George Hunsinger, 'Baptized into Christ's Death: Karl Barth and the Future of Roman Catholic Theology,' in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, pp. 253-278, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2000; p.263.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264. Italics included in the original text.

However in the so-called “middle conceptions” of both Christology and soteriology, or at least in its more consistent versions, things seem to be rather different. In these conceptions, Hunsinger argues that:

The work of Christ is again regarded as materially decisive for our salvation, but the definition of that work has changed. Sin is now more nearly a matter of *bondage* than of guilt, so that what we are saved from is more nearly sin’s *power* than its penalty. Consequently, the work of Christ is significant for us, because what it effects is more nearly our *re-empowerment* than our complete recreation. Because our plight is one of *estrangement* from God more nearly than enmity and condemnation, the solution is more nearly one of our being reunited with God *through an inner experience* of spiritual re-empowerment. The cross of Christ is significant, not because of vicarious expiatory suffering, but because it shows that Jesus fully took part in the *brokenness* of the human condition *without* forsaking his spiritual union with God. We are saved *not* so much by something fundamentally unique and *unrepeatable* that took place apart from us on our behalf as by a certain communion with Christ which allows *some measure* of his perfected spirituality and destiny to be *repeated or re-enacted* in our lives. We are saved by the effect *in us* for which the work apart from us functions as little more than the precondition for its possibility. Consequently, the person who goes with this work . . . would not be Jesus Christ the incarnate Savior (fully God, fully human) so much as *Jesus Christ the Redeemed Redeemer* (the divinely empowered human being). This person would be materially decisive, because the work he actually accomplished is efficacious for us. But he is not logically indispensable, because it would seem at least *in principle* that any other human being, if sufficiently empowered, might have accomplished or might yet accomplish much the same thing. The person of Christ required by a middle Christology is *unique but not unique in kind*.<sup>184</sup>

It would therefore seem that ‘the very essence of middle soteriology is the idea of salvation by spiritual *repetition*: what took place spiritually in Christ is what now takes place spiritually in us, i.e., the same *sort* of thing is to be repeated, regardless of all differences in degree. Although the Savior is the source of our salvation (or spiritual empowerment), the difference between the Savior and the saved would seem to be both relative and provisional.

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., pp. 264-265. Italics in Hunsinger’s original text.

Consequently, at the consummation of all things it would seem that the Savior will be little more than the first among equals.<sup>185</sup>

Hunsinger's essay makes important use of the Greek New Testament concept of *koinonia*, which is rather weakly translated as 'fellowship' or perhaps better 'communion' but which he suggests is best understood as 'mutual indwelling' and is often rendered in the New Testament by the preposition "in".<sup>186</sup> The *koinonia* relation therefore would seem to exemplify the "Chalcedonian pattern" in that it 'is always an ineffable union of mutual indwelling in which the terms [or persons] participate in one another for the sake of love "without separation or division" (inseparable unity), "without confusion or change" (irreducible identity), and with one term [or person] taking precedence over the other (asymmetry).'<sup>187</sup>

The use of the concept of *koinonia* therefore enables a fresh and perceptive analysis of the much contested, and often confused issues of Christology and soteriology, allowing further important clarifying distinctions to be drawn between what Hunsinger has here been calling "middle" and "high" conceptions. '*Koinonia* with Christ for the middle conception is essentially our participation in and appropriation of Christ's "spirituality," no matter whether it is called his God-consciousness, or the kingdom of God, or the new being, or authentic being-towards-death, or experiential religion, or the hermeneutical privilege of the poor, or womanspirit rising, or the rejection of violence, or the original blessing, or perhaps simply faith, or even faith formed by love. The list goes on and on, but the structure is always the same. What took place *extra nos* is no more than the condition for the possibility of what takes place *in nobis*. The *decisive locus of salvation* is not fixed in what took place in the cross of Christ there and then, but in what takes place in us or among us here and now. Salvation essentially encounters us as a *possibility* that is not actual for us *until* it is somehow actualised in our spiritual and social existence, and the *process* of

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., pp. 265-266.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., pp. 256-261.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., pp. 260-261.

actualisation proceeds by degrees. Though primarily a divine gift, salvation is always *also* a human task.’<sup>188</sup>

Pressing the distinctions thus opened up a bit further still it would appear that ‘[w]hat high views . . . share over against middle views . . . is the conviction that the decisive locus of salvation is what took place there and then on Golgotha, that our communion with Christ is our communion with the risen Savior who died *in our place*, that salvation encounters us as a *finished and perfect work* so that here and now it can only be received and attested *for what it is*, that neither its *actuality* nor its *efficacy* depends on our acceptance of it, that our accepting it depends rather on its *prior* actuality and efficacy *precisely* for us, and indeed for the whole world. In sum, in a high soteriology it is not Christ who points us to spirituality but spirituality that points us to Christ, who as God with us is the *exclusively unique* object of our worship and our faith. No one else will ever be God incarnate, and no one else will ever die for the sins of the world. High views agree that this conviction is the heart of the gospel, and that it is compatible with much in the middle view though not with the middle framework as a whole.’<sup>189</sup>

When Niebuhr’s interpretation of the person and work of Jesus Christ is pondered in the light of the above analysis it would seem that his presentation falls within the bounds of what Hunsinger labels the “middle conception”.<sup>190</sup> To construe Christ, as Niebuhr does, as essentially the ‘incarnation and mediator of faith’ who transforms or converts our innate polytheisms and henotheisms, is to place a relatively greater degree of emphasis on the existential appropriation of God’s saving work in Christ rather than on the more classically evangelical affirmation about its already perfectly complete nature as a finished work established once-for-all. There is much that is penetrating and illuminating in Niebuhr’s exposition of the person and work of Christ, especially in its portrayal of how the myriad ways in which faithlessness, be it broken faith or

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p. 267. For a similar line of argument on the greater adequacy of what he calls ‘soteriological objectivism’ see George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of his Theology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 103-151.

<sup>190</sup> George Hunsinger, personal correspondence with myself, 12 October 2001.

misplaced faith, is reconstructed and redirected by the radically monotheistic faith of Jesus so that human beings can once more trust in God's rule and be loyal to God's realm. The insights that Niebuhr offers here are undoubtedly of great and lasting benefit to our understanding of the phenomenological field of faith where issues of anthropology, Christology and soteriology intersect. But it would appear that Niebuhr's Christology and soteriology do not quite fit into a "high conception" in that his interpretation does not necessarily entail that Jesus Christ is "logically indispensable" or, at least 'unique in kind', in relation to his "materially decisive" work with the singularity or specificity of say a Barth or von Balthasar.

The matter may not, however, be quite so 'cut and dried' as Hunsinger, or perhaps Marshall, would imply. Both Frei and Hoedemaker have analysed Niebuhr's Christology, and the way in which it is entwined with his soteriology, and have offered a rather different assessment. Of particular importance to both of their analyses is the brief and often overlooked, but nonetheless important christological section in *Christ and Culture* entitled 'Toward a Definition of Christ'.<sup>191</sup> Here, Niebuhr argues that, whilst there are many varied and even contending interpretations or views of Christ, nonetheless, through the objective 'givenness' of the New Testament, there always remain these 'original portraits with which all later pictures may be compared and by which all caricatures may be corrected. And in these original portraits he is recognizably one and the same. Whatever roles he plays in the varieties of Christian experience, it is the same Christ who exercises these various offices.'<sup>192</sup>

Niebuhr is here working his way towards his own definition of Christ, acknowledging that though 'every description is an interpretation, it can be an interpretation of the objective reality. Jesus Christ who is the Christian's authority can be described, though every description falls short of completeness and must fail to satisfy others who have encountered him.'<sup>193</sup> The description that Niebuhr here chooses to elucidate is that of what he calls a 'moralist'

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<sup>191</sup> HRN, *Christ and Culture*, New York, Harper and Row, Torchbooks, (1951) 1975, pp. 11-29.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

whose task is that of 'pointing out and defining the virtues of Jesus Christ; though it will be evident that the resultant portrait needs to be complemented by other interpretations of the same subject, and that a moral description cannot claim to come closer to the essence than do metaphysical or historical descriptions. By the virtues of Christ we mean the excellences of character which on the one hand he exemplifies in his own life, and which on the other he communicates to his followers.'<sup>194</sup>

Amongst many possibilities, the virtues that Niebuhr expounds are those of love, hope, obedience, humility and faith. In such a Christology, 'any one of the virtues of Jesus may be taken as the key to the understanding of his character and teaching; but each is intelligible in its apparent radicalism only as a relation to God. It is better, of course, not to attempt to delineate him by describing one of his excellences but rather to take them all together, those to which we have referred and others.' But what is of chief importance for such a moral estimate of Jesus is that his identity or status 'is due to that unique devotion to God and to that single-hearted trust in Him which can be symbolized by no other figure of speech so well as the one which calls him Son of God.'<sup>195</sup>

The thought may occur that Niebuhr's account of Jesus Christ, though biblically-informed, is an example of what is sometimes rather unsatisfactorily called a 'Christology from below' in which the methodological focus is exclusively, and therefore, reductively, on the humanity of Jesus.<sup>196</sup> 'Yet this is only half the meaning of Christ, considered morally. . . Because he is the moral Son of God in his love, hope, faith, obedience, and humility in the presence of God, therefore he is the moral mediator of the Father's will towards men. Because he loves the Father with the perfection of human *eros*, therefore he loves men with the perfection of divine *agape*, since God is *agape*. Because he is obedient to the Father's will, therefore he exercises authority over men, commanding obedience not to his own will but to God's. Because he hopes in

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., pp. 14-15.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>196</sup> Nicholas Lash, 'Up and Down in Christology,' in Stephen Sykes and Derek Holmes, eds., *New Studies in Theology 1*, London, Duckworth, 1980, pp. 31-46; Colin E. Gunton, *Yesterday and Today: A Study of Continuities in Christology*, London, SPCK, 1997, pp. 10-55.

God, therefore he gives promises to men. Because he trusts perfectly in God who is faithful, therefore he is trustworthy in his own faithfulness towards men. Because he exalts God with perfect human humility, therefore he humbles men by giving them good gifts beyond all their deserts.<sup>197</sup> Niebuhr's christological summation therefore is that:

Since the Father of Jesus Christ is what He is, sonship to Him involves the Son not in an ambiguous but in an ambivalent process. It involves the double movement – with men toward God, with God toward men; from the world to the Other, from the Other to the world; from work to Grace, from Grace to work, from time to the Eternal and from the Eternal to the temporal. In his moral sonship to God Jesus Christ is not a median figure, half God, half man; he is a single person wholly directed as man toward God and wholly directed in his unity with the Father toward men. He is mediatorial, not median. He is not a center from which radiate love of God and of men, obedience to God and to Caesar, trust in God and in nature, hope in divine and in human action. He exists rather as the focusing point in the continuous alternation of movements from God to man and man to God; and these movements are qualitatively as different as are *agape* and *eros*, authority and obedience, promise and hope, humiliation and glorification, faithfulness and trust.<sup>198</sup>

Niebuhr makes it quite explicit that '[o]ther approaches besides the moral one must be taken if Jesus Christ is to be described adequately.'<sup>199</sup> But it would seem to be that with this 'moral interpretation' of Jesus Christ, as well as the extensive exposition that he offered into the transformation of broken and misplaced faith that we analysed earlier, that he has indeed answered much of Marshall's call for an 'identifying description' or 'adequate description' of Jesus Christ. Hans Frei, is so convinced, for in his opinion, 'Niebuhr meets the test that the tradition always imposes on the content of a Christology regardless of the merits of its method or approach (which should be secondary issues). A Christology must indicate the Lord's consubstantiality with the Father according to his Godhead; his consubstantiality with us according to his

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<sup>197</sup> HRN, *Christ and Culture*, p. 28.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.



humanity; the union of the two distinct natures; and the abiding distinctness and unconfusedness of these two natures in the one, unitary person.<sup>200</sup>

Marshall and Hunsinger have posed some challenging questions in the realms of Christology and soteriology. These questions can and should continue to command attention and respect. But they may not be fully adequate to the task of classifying each and every Christology and its associated soteriology. I would venture that Niebuhr is one such exception to the perhaps too neat 'pigeon-holing' that Marshall and /or Hunsinger strive for. According to Frei, in Niebuhr's distinctive, though brief outline of Christology, he 'takes a new and suggestive departure, and goes beyond the question of methodology to turn to actual theological content.' Frei's hope, that perhaps Niebuhr might yet turn his suggestive approach into something more substantive never took place, but Frei's wistful comment that Niebuhr's Christology, 'as the culmination of careful systematic thought and biblical exegesis, merits close attention' provides impetus for the aspiration that others might yet pursue this potentially 'fruitful' Niebuhrian line of approach to the person and work of Jesus Christ.<sup>201</sup> Indeed, recent New Testament scholarship has made Niebuhr's approach to Christology, seem, at the very least, a plausible one, in that it takes seriously once more, the socio-historic milieu in which Jesus the Jew interpreted and enacted his divine vocation.<sup>202</sup>

Niebuhr offers an innovative and yet deeply instructive prophetic wisdom of the cross. In particular, the powerful grip that sin, especially faithlessness, has upon our social selfhood, is delineated with a sure and sensitive grasp. However the evangelical tradition to which Niebuhr belongs has also given classical expression to the significance of Christ's person and work by speaking of his

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<sup>200</sup> Hans Frei, 'The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr,' in *Faith and Ethics*, op. cit., p. 115.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116. See also Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, op. cit., pp. 114-120 in which he offers a largely positive assessment of Niebuhr's Christology and soteriology, noting its ability to dialectically relate the approaches of Barth and Bultmann, though not without some unresolved tensions.

<sup>202</sup> James D. G. Dunn, 'Christology as an Aspect of Theology,' in *The Christ and the Spirit: Volume 1 Christology*, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1998, pp. 377-387; Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament*, Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 1998; N. T. Wright, 'The Reasons for Jesus' Crucifixion,' in *Jesus and the Victory of God*, London, SPCK, 1996, pp. 540-611.

'priestly' and 'kingly' offices as well as his 'prophetic' office. Niebuhr is not entirely bereft of references to Christ as 'priest' or 'king'. Indeed his most sustained christological/soteriological argument in *Faith on Earth*, speaks often of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ as now being in the ascendancy as a living presence who continues to exercise a mediatorial or priestly role. 'He is personally present as Master and Lord. He is the personal companion who by his loyalty to the self and by his trust in the Transcendent One *reconstructs* the broken interpersonal life of faith.'<sup>203</sup> As Niebuhr's son puts it in an editorial footnote, Niebuhr seems to have adapted some insights from George Herbert Mead and applied them to his own christological/soteriological argument so that 'HRN's line of argument appears to be that the *present* Jesus Christ of faith is the companion who reconstructs the faith by which we have lived in the past.'<sup>204</sup>

Niebuhr's distinctive idiom of radical monotheism tends, as we have seen, towards an emphasis upon the phenomenological or existential effects of salvation. Perhaps it is this which prompts Hunsinger to suggest that 'like most modern theologians he was incapable of dealing adequately with Christ's priestly office.'<sup>205</sup> But, as our lengthy exposition thus far of Niebuhr's work makes clear, and the material yet to come in subsequent chapters, especially the ethics of the responsible self should confirm; there is much that Niebuhr says that seems to correspond with the traditionally understood role of Christ as 'priest'. Niebuhr's language for this is couched in terms of Christ's radical monotheism or theocentric and universal responsibility, but in this vicarious and representative way he is still carrying out a saving ministry in our midst.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> HRN, *Faith on Earth*, p. 87.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, Editor's note 3., pp. 88-89.

<sup>205</sup> George Hunsinger, personal correspondence with myself, 12 October 2001.

<sup>206</sup> See Douglas John Hall, *Christian Theology in a North American Context: Vol. 2: Professing the Faith*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1996, pp. 363-553. Of particular importance is his use of the term 'representation' as a contemporary christological term, closely reflecting Niebuhr's moral or 'pistological' approach, pp. 506ff. See also Dorothee Solle, *Christ the Representative: An Essay in Theology after the "Death of God"*, trans. David Lewis, London, SCM Press, 1967; Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'Representation as the Form of the Salvation Event,' in *Systematic Theology: Vol. 2*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1994, pp. 416-437.

Hunsinger, though, it must be said, offers a more helpful line of thought when he writes that '[t]he entire gospel, as understood by the Reformation, depends on the affirmation that Christ's righteousness and life become ours as a gift that is received not by works but by faith alone. Because salvation is not properly a process but a once-for-all event that comes to us whole and entire, as a sheer gift, which is Christ himself, salvation is the stable basis and not the uncertain goal of the Christian life.'<sup>207</sup>

Niebuhr's work as a whole, and certainly its main thrust, leave one with the impression that here was someone so sensitively attuned to the existential pathologies of faithlessness and the attendant difficulties of life that salvation did seem to be at times, in fact rather often, more of a far-off, if not entirely uncertain goal, rather than a stable basis already objectively achieved and offered in Christ.

The title of this thesis, *Crucial Faith*, is intended to, in some way, indicate the issue under consideration here. The use of the word 'faith' demonstrates Niebuhr's abiding interest in the more subjective aspects of the broad subject matter of theology as a whole. His self-stated kinship with those whom he called 'theologians of experience', rather than 'theologians of doctrine' is clear evidence of where his primary interests lay, as well as the methodological approach that he normally took, since his work was predominantly a thorough analysis of the believing self or 'Christian life', albeit not narrowly or exclusively construed. Much less evident in Niebuhr is an equally sustained consideration of the 'object' of faith, namely the God made known in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. Unsurprisingly, then, he never attempted or aspired to write a comprehensive systematics, let alone a dogmatics, even in outline, since he rarely dwelt on matters of ontology, about either the being of God or of humanity, preferring, instead, to remain with descriptions of disposition and action.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Hunsinger, 'Baptized into Christ's Death,' *Disruptive Grace*, op. cit., p. 273.

<sup>208</sup> Daniel Day Williams, 'H. Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962) A Personal and Theological Memoir,' *Christianity and Crisis* 23 (1963), p. 211, 212.

It would be unfortunate and erroneous, however, to gain the impression that Niebuhr had a “low” conception of the person and work of Christ, or that he somehow fell far short of the classic evangelical truths for which the Reformation so strongly and rightly contended. Niebuhr was as vigorous as anyone in his affirmation that salvation is a divine gift and not a human achievement. Though seldom making use of the formulation ‘justification by grace through faith’, Niebuhr could be said to have been an exemplar of that motto’s truth throughout his writings. In particular, his ‘pistology’ or ‘faith analysis’ has offered the theological world the deceptively simple but profoundly subtle insight that faith is both ‘divine gift’ and ‘human task’ by rendering this in the terminology of ‘trust’ and ‘loyalty’. Trust is the ‘passive aspect of the faith relation’ in that God demonstrates his trustworthiness in Jesus Christ as divinely-effected gift thus evoking or calling forth ‘loyalty or faithfulness’ as the active side of the grace-enabled faith relation.<sup>209</sup> Much fruitless and quarrelsome disagreement about the nature of salvation and faith is undercut or reframed by Niebuhr’s christologically-grounded exposition.

Niebuhr’s delicate interweaving of christological and soteriological issues prompts the question of the actuality or possibility of growth or progress in the life of faith so reconstructed and redirected by God in Christ. An abiding and recurring theme in his work is that the life of faith so restored by Christ is to be understood in terms of ‘transformation’ or ‘conversion’, motifs which emphasize the restless, dynamic and unfinished nature of the social self’s faith relation. In a way which is again reminiscent of Barth, Niebuhr stresses the ‘event-like’ character of the faith relation which centres in Christ, constantly reiterating and underscoring the fact that the relation in question is one of ‘occurrence, happening, event, history, decisions, and act.’<sup>210</sup>

Barth, it must be acknowledged, makes much more of the ‘once-for-all’ nature of the saving work of God in Jesus Christ. His thoroughly ‘objectivistic’

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<sup>209</sup> HRN, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, p. 18. See the more extended treatment of this theme in Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, pp. 85 ff.; *Radical Monotheism*, pp. 16ff.

<sup>210</sup> George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, op. cit., p. 30. Hunsinger calls this “actualism” and it aptly describes Niebuhr’s recurring emphasis too, for example, HRN, *The Meaning of Revelation*, pp. 138-139; *Faith on Earth*, pp. 99, 108ff; *Radical Monotheism*, p. 31, as well as numerous other possible references.

understanding of soteriology is much more thorough and consistent in emphasising and grounding salvation in the stable basis of the already achieved historic event of Christ than is Niebuhr's more 'subjectivist' interpretation. The *extra nos* aspect of salvation is a strong feature of Barth's interpretation, as it was for Luther and Calvin as well, in that our salvation is simply 'in Christ' as is affirmed in, for instance, 1 Corinthians 1:30. However at the more existential *in nobis* level, where salvation is appropriated in the life of the believer, there are other aspects to be considered as well as the 'once-for-all' motif. These are the motifs of 'again and again' where the working of grace through faith is a newly recurring event; and the 'more and more' motif, which speaks, though with caution and restraint, so that complacency and presumption do not hold sway, of what might be called 'progress' or 'growth' in the life of faith.<sup>211</sup>

Where and how to place Niebuhr with regard to these motifs is an intriguing question. Arguably more concerned with the existential *in nobis* of soteriology rather than the more classically evangelical *extra nos*, he nonetheless did accept and affirm the latter. In my judgement, at the existential *in nobis* level, Niebuhr is probably closer to Luther and Barth in that he was sceptical of placing too much emphasis on the 'more and more' aspect. His writings give evidence of his belief that growth or maturity in faith was possible, but his perennial critique of Christian henotheism, as a manifestation of his distinctive 'logic of the cross', prevented him from becoming too sanguine about the supposed righteousness of the 'faithful'.

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<sup>211</sup> Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace*, pp. 274-275; 295-304 where Hunsinger compares the use of these three *in nobis* motifs in Luther, Calvin and Barth. According to Hunsinger, Luther emphasised all three in the following diminishing order of significance: 'once-for-all', 'again and again', 'more and more'; Calvin also accepted the 'once-for-all' but the 'again and again' receded in favour of a strong emphasis on the 'more and more'; whereas in Barth the 'once-for-all' emphasis was very strong, as, to a lesser extent, was the 'again and again' (echoing Luther), but the 'more and more' aspect tended to recede.

## 5. Pneumatology: A Niebuhrian Problem?

As the previous section has served to show, Niebuhr's theology is, if not entirely Christocentric in the thoroughgoing manner of the mature Barth, nonetheless rich in christological insight. His radical monotheism is an interesting and innovative treatment of how Jesus Christ is materially decisive for what the Church understands by salvation, even if certain questions still remain open or unresolved, about whether Christ, so understood, is also uniquely indispensable. Jesus is crucial to the evangelical perspective that Niebuhr develops in his theocentric depiction, albeit at the level of what Hunsinger suggests might be a 'middle conception' of the person and work of Christ. The importance and richness of Niebuhr's Christology, especially as we have explored it in his posthumous *Faith on Earth*, is a resource upon which future theology can surely draw, highlighting as it does certain features that may amplify and supplement the christological insights of others.

But as our focus now turns to that of pneumatology, it will become apparent that Niebuhr's treatment of this important aspect of theology is remarkably scant. Throughout his corpus as a whole, there is relatively little direct reference to the Holy Spirit, and those that do occur are rarely developed at any great length. In this section, therefore, we shall offer a brief exposition of the major exception to this rule, namely, his reflections on pneumatology in the final chapter of *Faith on Earth*.<sup>212</sup> Then we shall trace his other references to the Holy Spirit elsewhere in his writings, as well as offering a brief assessment or critique of what we find.

In the closing chapter of *Faith on Earth* Niebuhr states that 'theology will understand that neither faith nor love, neither wisdom nor dependence, is the foundation on which the Christian life rests; that the foundation is God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and that the unity which is present in life with God and

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<sup>212</sup> See Fowler, *op. cit.*, pp. 232-235.

Christ and neighbor comes from Him and from Him alone.'<sup>213</sup> Remarkably, considering the strength of the affirmation or confession made in the above statement, this is the first reference to either the Holy Spirit or to God as Trinity in the entire constructive argument of the book. To only bring this conviction into play at such a late stage in his argument is noteworthy, to say the least. But it is how Niebuhr addresses the specific issue of pneumatology that concerns us here, and obviously, as the following reflections show, also calls for further testing on his part as well.

In tension with, or even in seeming contradiction to, his earlier Trinitarian affirmation, Niebuhr speaks of 'the impossibility of developing an adequate understanding of the reality and work of the Holy Spirit on the basis of such a theory of faith as has been set forth above. There is no need when we speak of faith as acknowledgment of and trust in the reality of faithful, self-binding, promise-making and promise-keeping selfhood to develop the binitarian formula, so prevalent in Christianity, into a Trinitarian formula.'<sup>214</sup>

As Niebuhr understands it, his particular faith analysis deals with vital 'spiritual principles, that is, with internal elements in man and God,'<sup>215</sup> but this is more at the level of what he variously labels 'character' or 'personality' or 'freedom' or 'selfhood'. From this Niebuhr concludes that 'the Creator is Spirit, in this sense of "spirit," that he is Being with the inner reality of selfhood, covenanting and keeping faith.'<sup>216</sup> Likewise, argues Niebuhr, since the human being is said to live by faith through mutual bonds of trust and faithfulness, there 'is a spirit in man, which not only proceeds from the Father in the sense that man was and is so created as to be and to become a covenanting self, but also in the sense that this inner selfhood is in every moment dependent upon the presence of that Other Spirit, a Universal Thou.'<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> HRN, *Faith on Earth*, pp. 102-103.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

Furthermore, Niebuhr cites 2 Corinthians 3: 17, "The Lord is the Spirit", to indicate that, according to his understanding of the matter, this text refers to Jesus Christ as Lord, one who is 'not simply the historic individual Jesus, though he is that too, but . . . the inner personal companion who as person is present in the memory and expectation of the believer.'<sup>218</sup> Niebuhr also cites Galatians 2:20, "It is no longer I that live but Christ who lives in me", to speak of the relation between Christ and the Christian where Christ is 'the personal companion who has been engrafted into my personal existence so that I cannot and do not live except in this companionship.'<sup>219</sup> But for Niebuhr, it is important to note that this emphasis on personal unity between Father, Son and believer, established by Christ's mediating presence and action, is not simply reduced to one of identity since '[p]ersonality precludes identity.'<sup>220</sup> Niebuhr thus draws the following important conclusions:

When we have said this we have said that the third principle in the Deity of which our beliefs speak does not appear from the point of view of the analysis of faith to be a person as the Father and the Son are persons. The three persons who are involved in the community of faith are Father, Son and this poor human self which has by creation and redemption been lifted into the unbelievable privilege of communion with Father and Son and with all those other persons into whom God has breathed his Spirit. *Spirit*, rather than being a third personal principle in the Deity, is an attribute of the two persons in the Godhead and that which makes it possible for us to be selves with them. We are thus led to a kind of binitarian formula; God is Father and Son in two persons. The Spirit is that which, being of the very nature of God, is given and matured and restored to human persons. It is the principle of community among selves who are united in trust and loyalty to Father and to Son. But Spirit on the basis of this analysis is not person in the sense in which Father and Son are.<sup>221</sup>

Niebuhr suggests two further reasons to back up his claims. First, he appeals to what he calls the 'prevalence of the binitarian rather than of the Trinitarian formula in the Scriptures and in the church.'<sup>222</sup> Second, he argues that the

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., pp. 104-105.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.



'direct language of faith in prayer and in oaths of loyalty' rarely makes reference to the Holy Spirit, unlike the frequent addressing of Father and Son that perennially occurs in the Christian life. The relative truth of these claims might be contested, but one can allow that Niebuhr's assertions are at least plausible.<sup>223</sup>

However, Niebuhr's next move is intriguing. Having shown the binitarian logic of his analysis, he backs away from making it into a positive assertion which would thus contradict classical trinitarianism. Even though he feels that the latter seems to be 'speculative', he states his unwillingness to break faith with the attested experiences of many in the community of faith whose belief is that they have had real encounter with a personal agent whom the tradition has named as the Holy Spirit.<sup>224</sup> This leaves Niebuhr to ponder three possible options. First, we can explicitly deny all so-called extraordinary spiritual events, including Pentecost, declaring all such phenomena as 'abnormal' or even 'heretical'. Second, we can place an almost blind trust in the veracity of such encounters as have been attested in Scripture and in subsequent tradition, but 'without seeking to reenact for ourselves under their guidance the experiences of which they speak without seeking to understand what has become a part of our own existence.'<sup>225</sup>

Niebuhr suggests that neither of these first two options are satisfactory, so instead, he offers a third one in which we 'consider only one reality as normative, God in Christ, Christ in God, to whom the faith of the past and ours is directed and from whom it proceeds.'<sup>226</sup> It follows, therefore, that '[w]e shall not repeat the beliefs of the past as statements reflecting our own faith; this we cannot do and still keep faith with our fellowmen; yet we shall trust these men of our community who so reported what they understood of their life with God and we shall think of these beliefs as reports and as prophecies. Sometime,

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid., pp. 105-106.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., pp. 106-107.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

perhaps, we shall understand the reality to which they refer. This applies to many of us when we deal with the beliefs about the Holy Spirit.'<sup>227</sup>

The foregoing remarks are an exemplary demonstration of Niebuhr's sense of what it means to be accountable to both church and academy without, thereby, denying his own intellectual integrity. In a way not dissimilar to his remarks in the next section of this thesis about the relative weight of importance that confession of the Lordship of Christ should occupy, Niebuhr here attempts to offer his own distinct perspective in as responsible and humble a manner as possible. This leads him to conclude that 'in our life in faith we know that God is Spirit, that the Lord is Spirit, that the spirit in the human being proceeds from the Father and the Son, that the Spirit which proceeds from the Father and the Son is interpersonal reality. We can attach great significance to the statement that the Spirit is consubstantial with Father and Son. What we cannot say for ourselves is that the Spirit is not the Father, that he is not the Son, and that he is equal to Father and Son – as a power or a person like them but distinct from them. But those of us who speak in this fashion are not in a position to deny that the classic formulation is true. We can believe it; it is not an expression of our trust in God, however, and not an oath of loyalty to him but only an expression of our lower trust, our secondary but real loyalty to the community of faith which has so expressed its trust in God and so made its vow of fidelity. I believe that there is a Holy Spirit.'<sup>228</sup>

These reflections typify much in Niebuhr's theological rationale, in particular his intellectual integrity. He acknowledges the strength of the classic doctrinal tradition, and so, whilst recognising that his own existential convictions and understandings of the matter do not quite match the Church's commonly-held creed, he is prepared to defer to its historic and communal authority within the community of faith. Once again, it is an example of his reluctance to promulgate or perpetuate any doctrine which he feels is not rooted in his own experience or does not resonate with him existentially. To do so, to his mind, would be to give too much credence to the more theoretical or

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

speculative aspects of doctrine. But it is important to note that he intends to keep open the future possibility that what he cannot, at present, fully and unreservedly endorse, may yet become his own personal experience and confession. In the meantime, he will accept, at what he considers the lower level of faith namely, propositional belief, that the Holy Spirit is both personal and divine.

The consensus of informed opinion is that Niebuhr's pneumatology is underdeveloped.<sup>229</sup> In this he could be said to have much in common with many theologians for whom reflection on the identity and agency of the Holy Spirit has suffered much by comparison with other doctrinal loci. His pneumatological neglect is perhaps partly understandable when one considers that during the time of his major creative output, that is, roughly the middle third of the twentieth century, explicit reflection on the Holy Spirit was relatively sparse. Since then, of course, there has been a marked upsurge in attention to this particular theme, which, though demonstrating a wide variety of approaches, nonetheless bears witness to a felt need to correct the imbalance or comparative neglect that pneumatology and even, Trinitarian theology had undergone in previous generations.<sup>230</sup>

To say much more than this would take us well beyond the scope of this thesis. There are, I believe, certain elements in Niebuhr's theology which would lend themselves to a more robust or developed pneumatology than we have found to be the case in our analysis thus far. Some of these will emerge in the next chapter where we will look at his legacy from an ethical perspective, and in which the theme of the human being as 'the responsible self' will come to the fore. It is my proposal that this concept might well provide some raw material out of which could be developed something more substantial about the 'agency'

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<sup>229</sup> See, for example, Hoedemaker, *op. cit.*, p. 126; Frei, 'Niebuhr's Theological Background,' *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>230</sup> For useful if not exhaustive surveys of pneumatology and some appreciation of its historic and ecumenical diversity see Gary D. Badcock, *Light of Truth & Fire of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1997; Donald Bloesch, *The Holy Spirit: Works and Gifts*, Illinois, IVP, 2000; Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Understanding*, Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2002.

or 'work' of the Holy Spirit, if not so much about the Spirit's 'person' or 'identity'.

## 6. Theology: Niebuhr's Doctrine of God

We have already noted the way in which Niebuhr attempts to place his own reflections in responsible relation to the classic creedal and doctrinal reflections of the mainstream of Christian theological tradition. In the areas of both Christology and pneumatology, we have seen how he develops his own particular line of thought, one which is marked by a neo-Kantian and social existentialist epistemology. In both these areas, he attempts to develop his favoured 'faith-analysis' as a distinct contribution to the interpersonal interactions of divine and human selves who live by covenant relationships of trust and loyalty. Because he asks rather different questions from much of the mainstream tradition, his enquiries produce answers that do not always or immediately sound 'orthodox' or 'classical'. But he is no theological maverick, and as we had cause to see in the areas of both Christology and pneumatology, he is always aware of where his own proposals stand in relation to the Church's orthodox formulations. Whilst demurring from repeating them verbatim as his own doctrinal beliefs, he is still prepared, nonetheless, to defer to the central teachings of the Church as authoritatively and communally binding and normative.

The question arises, however, about Niebuhr's 'Theology' proper: that is, his doctrine of God. If he acknowledges that the Lordship of God 'comes before the acknowledgment of Christ's lordship'<sup>231</sup> and if he also believes in the Holy Spirit but not necessarily as a distinct person, co-equal with God the Father and God the Son, what then are we to make of his understanding of this most basic of Christian doctrines? More pointedly still: is his 'Theology' consistent with the affirmations of the tradition in its most classic form, that is, God as Trinity?

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<sup>231</sup> HRN, 'Reformation: Continuing Imperative', *op. cit.*, p. 250.

Scholarly opinion is divided on this issue. The secondary literature presents a far from unanimous verdict on Niebuhr's doctrine of God, partly, perhaps, because of his inconsistent, or as some might say, ambivalent appeal to the classic understanding of God as Trinity; but also, perhaps, because as suggested above, his distinct line of enquiry, in which he sometimes asked, and attempted to answer, a rather different set of questions from the mainstream tradition, led to a number of hypotheses or proposals which are difficult to neatly classify according to the typical categories of theological discourse.

Among those who are most critical of Niebuhr's doctrine of God are Kenneth M. Hamilton and John Howard Yoder. Hamilton's critique is based on only one of Niebuhr's books, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, and basically argues that Niebuhr doesn't so much defend unitarian principles as assume them, since as Hamilton interprets Niebuhr here, 'the doctrine of the Trinity [is] something less to be discarded than to be disregarded.'<sup>232</sup> In Yoder's case, the charge levelled at Niebuhr is that in his writings, it would appear that most of the time any 'reference to the Trinity seems . . . to be a slogan, symbolizing in a superficial way our author's urbane, pluralistic concern for a balance between Christ and other moral authorities.'<sup>233</sup> Yoder feels that Niebuhr's appeal to orthodox Trinitarianism is somewhat disingenuous since, when quizzed about this by Yoder, none of those who are former students and friendly interpreters of Niebuhr 'seem to believe that he meant seriously to claim that the distributive or modalist use which he makes of the doctrine of the Trinity, for purposes of a corrective polemic against one-sidedness in modern ethics, should be taken as real appeal to what was at stake at Nicea.'<sup>234</sup> Speaking further of those Niebuhrian students whom he consulted, Yoder writes that there seems 'to be agreement on their part that Niebuhr's ostensible claim to be reading the doctrine of the Trinity as normative doctrinal history ought to be taken with a grain of salt. His concern is with the notion of

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<sup>232</sup> Kenneth M. Hamilton, 'Trinitarianism Disregarded: The Theological Orientation of H. Richard Niebuhr and Cyril C. Richardson,' *Encounter* 23 (1962) pp. 343-352, p. 343.

<sup>233</sup> John Howard Yoder, 'How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*,' in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, ed. Glenn H. Stassen, Nashville, Abingdon Press, pp. 31-89, p. 63.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

balancing out competing considerations, to which end he uses numerous triads; Trinity is merely one metaphor for that.'<sup>235</sup>

The paper that has largely prompted this line of interpretation is *The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church*.<sup>236</sup> In this paper, Niebuhr makes use of the doctrine of the Trinity on largely pragmatic or ethical grounds, arguing that one, though only one of many important things that this doctrine does, is to provide a more balanced and comprehensive framework against which perennial tendencies towards various 'unitarianisms' can be measured and corrected. It acts, one might say, in an ecumenical or 'regulative' way by means of which, not only various 'unitarianisms' of the 'Creator' or 'Father' may be critiqued, but also does so for what he calls 'unitarianisms' of the 'Son' or 'Jesus Christ', and also those 'unitarianisms' which focus preponderantly on 'the Spirit'. But whatever potential this Niebuhrian use of the doctrine of the Trinity may hold, one cannot help but feel that those who criticise his approach, or at least have certain questions and misgivings about it,<sup>237</sup> are right to infer that it is more of a convenient and corrective device in the face of various distortions, rather than a positive means of saying something about the identity of the God made known in Jesus Christ, and thus confessed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As has been suggested earlier in this thesis, some key Christian doctrines were not exhaustively defined or developed by Niebuhr. Among those doctrines which remained underdeveloped in his theology, we may place his treatment of the Trinity. Perhaps then, it is all the more important to attend to what is his most explicit reflection on this topic in his entire corpus, albeit one which is found in a rather obscure publication, and one which yet again offers only hints and suggestions, rather than substantive dogmatic material. He writes:

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid., n. 80, p. 279.

<sup>236</sup> HRN, 'The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church,' *Theology Today* 3 (1946), pp. 371-384; Reprinted in *Theology Today* 60/2 (1983), pp. 150-157; and also in *Theology, History and Culture*, William Stacy Johnson, ed., New Haven, Yale University Press, 1996, pp. 50-62.

<sup>237</sup> John D. Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr*, op. cit., pp. 99-100.

The theological standpoint from which I shall endeavor to view these [missionary] motives is Trinitarian, that is to say, it is neither Christocentric, nor spiritualistic, nor creativistic, but all of these at once. In this sense it seeks to be theocentric. I seek to understand as one who believes in God, the Father, the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ his Son, who for us men and our salvation was incarnate, was crucified, raised from the dead and reigns with the Father as one God, and in the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son (from the Father as much as from the Son), and who is the immanent divine principle not only in the church but in the world created and governed by God.<sup>238</sup>

What seems to emerge from this and from the other scattered references in his writings, is that within what he claims is a broadly Trinitarian framework, Niebuhr's enduring emphasis is on the unity of God in which a strongly monarchical element comes to the fore. In his class lectures he gives the descriptive label 'patro-centred Trinitarians' to those theologians whom he considers to have a broadly similar approach to his own theocentric orientation, namely, Augustine, Calvin and Jonathan Edwards.<sup>239</sup> In the same lecture, Niebuhr asks rhetorically, 'Why isn't HRN a Unitarian?' to which he replies, 'I am – but [I'm] also a Trinitarian!' These personal confessions bring us back to one of the bedrock affirmations that Niebuhr refuses to let go, the basically monotheistic belief of Judaism that God is sovereign. Niebuhr invests so much in this concept that a strain is continually placed upon his attempts to hold both theocentricity and Trinity together, and the way in which he tries to do so, by means of the radical monotheism incarnate in and mediated by Jesus Christ, presents some possibly Christological, and certainly, pneumatological inadequacies which he seemed either unwilling or unable to resolve. Hence we can concur with the insights of both Frei<sup>240</sup> and Hoedemaker<sup>241</sup> that Niebuhr, though making claim to the Trinity as his fundamental theological framework, never quite convinces that this is indeed the case. The main reason would appear to be that his methodology, which is a unique combination of neo-

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<sup>238</sup> HRN, 'An Attempt at a Theological Analysis of Missionary Motivation,' *Occasional Bulletin from the Missionary Research Library* [New York] 14, 1 (1963), pp. 1-6, p. 1

<sup>239</sup> HRN, 'Introduction to Theological Studies,' Yale Divinity School, 31 October 1960, notes transcribed by Beth Keiser, a student in Niebuhr's class.

<sup>240</sup> Frei, 'The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr,' op. cit., pp. 94-104.

<sup>241</sup> Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 108-114.

Kantian, historicist, moral and social existentialist elements, severely compromises any efforts to understand God's inner being. From the outset, therefore, and in principle, Niebuhr is only left with the option of exploring certain dimensions of God's actions *ad extra*, the so-called 'economic Trinity', that is, the history of God's actions in relation to the creation. He can therefore say little about a subject that has exercised some of the greatest minds in classic Christian thinking: the relation between, and, indeed, identity of, God as 'economic' and also 'immanent' Trinity.

Perhaps it is best, therefore, to finish this section by attending to Niebuhr's own words on the matter, reflecting as they do, his own characteristically restrained appeal to the Trinity, together with his emphasis on the unity of God, and also his hints that the doctrine as historically stated, does not quite resonate with the deepest existential tendencies of contemporary life. He writes:

If the long story of the Trinitarian debate in Christendom is to be re-enacted in our present time its outcome may result in somewhat different formulations from those of the past, but scarcely in a substantive change of the affirmation that God is One and that however the doctrine of the *Personae* is stated it must still be affirmed that the Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Father and the Spirit cannot be equated with either.<sup>242</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

It finally remains, therefore, to draw the various stands of this chapter together. We have been considering Niebuhr's mature work from an evangelical perspective, that is to say, in the twofold sense, firstly, of carrying out an exposition of the subject matter that deals primarily with the good news of God's saving work in Jesus Christ, and secondly, of assessing this against the mainstream position of the classic evangelical tradition, that is, one which has

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<sup>242</sup> HRN, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, p. 45.



its roots in Biblical, Nicean, Chalcedonian and Reformation discourse. What do we make of Niebuhr's work in this perspective so defined?

Niebuhr's reflections, it would appear, are at their best and most persuasive, in terms of addressing some areas of the work of God in Jesus Christ. His chief focus here is on soteriology as a matter of how human faithlessness, in its various forms, is transformed into radical faithfulness, in which Jesus Christ is the incarnation and mediator of such a 'materially decisive' saving conversion. He depicts this change with great impressionistic power in such a way that the reader literally feels caught up in the existential transition being thus described. As such, Niebuhr has surely contributed something of lasting value to the evangelical presentation of what is meant by 'saving faith' in Christian discourse, especially in its deployment of such basic interpersonal dispositions of trust and loyalty. To this extent, his is a noteworthy demonstration of the *theologia crucis* tradition.

But the very strength of this also hints at some of its inadequacies as well. Niebuhr's heavy investment in the currency of social existentialism, together with his relative neglect of the value that others have found in the more classical doctrinal tradition, arguably yields a lower return in terms of such crucial evangelical themes as pneumatology and 'Theology' proper, that is, the Christian understanding of God as Trinity. Niebuhr is not entirely lacking in his treatment of these particular aspects of the gospel, but his work in these areas is, as we have seen, underdeveloped at best, and reductionist at worst. As regards the theme of Christology, it is perhaps wiser to record a more provisional and open-ended verdict. Niebuhr's emphasis is more on the 'work' of Christ than the 'person' but, in his distinctively innovative 'pistological' and 'moral' depictions, he does give us, I believe, something approaching an 'adequate identifying description' of Jesus and therefore may well meet most of the important criteria for a proper and productive Christology.

If Niebuhr's questions to the great evangelical tradition of the Church have to do with wondering whether it does well enough in relating the good news of Christ to the existential exigencies of contemporary humanity, the challenge

running the other way is whether Niebuhr's work has finally let the anguish of his existential concerns partially eclipse or mute the full ramifications of that 'triumph of grace' which the Triune God has definitively established in Jesus Christ.

## Chapter Three: An Ethical Perspective

### 1. Root Metaphors: A Critique of Two Traditional Theories

In his Christian Ethics lecture courses given in Yale over many years, Niebuhr normally undertook a historical-comparative and constructive approach to the study of what he called 'The Structure and Dynamics of the Moral Life'.<sup>243</sup> In these he conducted an investigation of the two major classical principles which Christian ethical thinkers have used to understand and expound morality. Niebuhr spoke of how Christian ethicists mostly went about their task by appropriating already existing theories from elsewhere, namely, the teleological and deontological approaches. 'The Christian moralist is always converting a philosophy in his theology [and therefore] many of the disputes between Christian ethicists arise out of the fact that they convert different philosophies.'<sup>244</sup>

Niebuhr's procedure in his class lectures, and in his posthumously published ethical prolegomena, *The Responsible Self*, was to analyse these two major approaches, noting that within each one there were many varying versions or types. In brief compass, his main insights on each can be articulated by making use of what he called 'root metaphors' or 'symbolic forms'.<sup>245</sup> Since Niebuhr's use of these cognate terms are of vital importance to the exposition and interpretation of his ethics, it is important to briefly consider them at this point of our thesis.

'What is' he asks, 'the general idea in such interpretation of ourselves as *symbolic* more than as *rational* animals? It is, I believe, this: that we are far

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<sup>243</sup> HRN, 'Christian Ethics Lecture Notes', 1946-47; 1952-53; 1953-54; 1961-62.

<sup>244</sup> HRN, 'Christian Ethics Lecture Notes', 1946-47, p. 5.

<sup>245</sup> Niebuhr was influenced in this regard by Stephen Pepper's 'root metaphor' theory of metaphysical reflection and Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of 'symbolic forms'. See Stephen Pepper, *World Hypotheses*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1961 and Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, Garden City, Doubleday Anchor Books, 1953. Of significance here too to Niebuhr was Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. W. R. Trask, New York, Oxford University Press, 1953, esp. chapter 1.

more image-making and image-using creatures that we usually think ourselves to be and, further, that our processes of perception and conception, of organizing and understanding the signs that come to us in our dialogue with the circumambient world, are guided and formed by images in our minds.<sup>246</sup> Our languages, no less than any other part of our lives, are shaped by, and manifestations of, this same phenomenon. 'And so with metaphysics the root-metaphors of generating substance, of the republic, of the organism, of the machine, of the event, and of the mathematical system have exercised a deep-going influence on the construction of the great systems which those great artists, the metaphysical philosophers, have set before us as images of being itself.'<sup>247</sup>

Man as language-user, man as thinker, man as interpreter of nature, man as artist, man as worshiper, seems to be always symbolic man, metaphor-using, image-making, and image-using man. What then about man as moral, man as deciding between goods, as evaluating man, as self-defining, self-creating man, as the judge of conduct in its rightness and wrongness? Is man in this activity also the symbolic animal? Since man as moral agent is present in all his activities it would seem likely that in his total decision-making and the administration of all his affairs he would be no less symbolic than he is in any one of them.<sup>248</sup>

It is therefore on the basis of 'root metaphors' or 'symbolic forms' that Niebuhr thus proposes to analyse the moral or ethical life of the human being or social self. He will do so by considering the underlying image or 'synecdochic analogy'<sup>249</sup> as a kind of heuristic device so as to construe the whole person according to one of two basic patterns: in the case of teleological ethical theory, "man-the-maker"; and according to deontological ethical theory, "man-the-citizen". To each of these we briefly turn.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> HRN, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*, New York, Harper and Row, 1963, pp. 151-152.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 153-154.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56. A 'synecdoche' is a figure of speech by which a part is made to comprehend the whole, or the whole is put for a part.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48-68, but especially here pp. 48-56.

In the case of teleological ethics, as exemplified in the works of Aristotle and Aquinas, the human being is understood according to the seemingly inherent characteristic of being able to fashion things so as to achieve some necessary or desirable end. "Man-the-maker" has the aptitude or ability to perform certain acts in order to achieve a particular purpose or goal. This intentional urge is so basic and prevalent that for many people it has become a persuasive, or even the most predominant way of construing the human being as ethical agent.

In the case of deontological ethics, as exemplified by, among others, Kant, the human being is understood according to the master image of politics or legislation. "Man-the-citizen" considers that life is to be interpreted and lived in accordance with the proven necessities of organising self and society as laid down in laws, rules and customs.

Within each of these basic positions there are, of course, many variations, so much so, that internal strife between competing teleologists and deontologists is a widespread and perennial occurrence. But in addition to these internal sources of strife, there are many points of disagreement and conflict between these two basic orientations themselves. As Kliever puts it in an admirable summary:

"Man-the-maker" theories of ethics help make sense of human freedom and historical change in moral action, but they underestimate the facticities of life and the importance of the human past. They do not fully perceive how life stubbornly resists human design, nor do they understand the impact of the past on present and future experience. As a consequence, teleological theories do not adequately account for the place of guilt, tragedy and character in the moral life. "Man-the-citizen" ethics clarify the importance of objectivity and impartiality in moral judgment and offer a clear rationale for moral instruction and discipline. But they reflect even less awareness of the temporality and solidarity of moral existence than do teleological accounts. Consequently, deontological theories offer little illumination of anxiety, freedom and change in the moral life.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> Lonnie D. Kliever, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

Both of these venerable theories have, of course, served humanity well. They have given reflective shape and substance to the ethical existence of numerous individuals and communities throughout history, and doubtless will continue to do so. But Niebuhr also asks us to notice their inadequacies as well: the inconsistencies and contradictions within the varied sub-groups that shelter under each broad theory; the disagreements which arise as a result of fundamental differences as to whether 'goals' or 'rules' per se are the principal concern in ethics; the failure of each, either separately or in conjunction, to illuminate and address the 'moral ontology'<sup>252</sup> of lived experience.<sup>253</sup>

So if both "man-the-maker" and "man-the-citizen" are not fully adequate to the task of clarifying and guiding our ethical conduct, is there another image that might not entail such distortions or shortcomings? Niebuhr suggests that there is such an alternative theory and this he names as that of "man-the-answerer".<sup>254</sup> He does not assert the absolute superiority of this third option over and against the two more traditional theories already mentioned, but he does now begin to make a persuasive case for its viability in illuminating certain aspects of the wholeness of our moral ontology that escape both teleology and deontology. This alternative theory that Niebuhr advances is what he calls the 'ethics of responsibility'. In light of this image 'we think of all our actions as having the pattern of what we do when we answer another who addresses us. To be engaged in dialogue, to answer questions addressed to us, to defend ourselves against attacks, to reply to injunctions, to meet challenges – this is a common experience. And now we try to think of all our actions as having this character of being responses, answers, to actions upon us.'<sup>255</sup>

It is Niebuhr's belief that this ethical theory corresponds more fully to the reality of moral experience than do the other alternative theories since these tend, in their differing ways, to abstract from the actual contextual dynamics of

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<sup>252</sup> The phrase 'moral ontology' is one used by Charles Taylor and later borrowed by John Webster in his work on Karl Barth. See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 8; John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 215.

<sup>253</sup> Kliever, op. cit., p. 116; HRN, *The Responsible Self*, pp. 56-60.

<sup>254</sup> HRN, *The Responsible Self*, p. 56.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid. See also Albert R. Jonsen, *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics*, Washington, Corpus Books, 1968. For Jonsen on Niebuhr's ethics, see pp. 132-152.

life. Furthermore, the ethics of responsive relations seem to make more sense of the so-called 'limit experiences' that people often encounter in which personal sufferings and social emergencies call seriously into question the prominence or predominance of the pursuit of goals or the obedience of rules. 'Because suffering is the exhibition of the presence in our existence of that which is not under our control, or of the intrusion into our self-legislating existence of an activity operating under another law than ours, it cannot be brought adequately within the spheres of teleological and deontological ethics, the ethics of man-the-maker, or man-the-citizen. Yet it is in the response to suffering that many and perhaps all men, individually and in their groups, define themselves, take on character, develop their ethos.'<sup>256</sup>

Niebuhr is nudging his argument in the direction of what might be called 'greater coherence': that is, he is arguing for what he believes to be the greater applicability and flexibility of his theory of responsibility than is possible with either the theories of teleological or deontological ethics. Indeed, he goes as far as to suggest that the ethics of responsibility can overcome some of the inadequacies of these two theories, and perhaps also combine some of their strengths in a new or more comprehensive 'third way'. The trajectory of this argument would seem to be borne out when he writes:

If we use value terms then the differences among the three approaches may be indicated by the terms, the *good*, the *right* and the *fitting*; for teleology is concerned always with the highest good to which it subordinates the right; consistent deontology is concerned with the right, no matter what may happen to our goods; but for the ethics of responsibility the *fitting* action, the one that fits into a total interaction as response and as anticipation of further response, is alone conducive to the good and alone is right.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> HRN, *The Responsible Self*, op. cit., p. 60.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

## 2. An Alternative Metaphor: The Responsible Self

At perhaps the crucial juncture in his Christian Ethics lectures at Yale in 1952-53, Niebuhr wrote that 'we should think of life as more than movement to a goal, as more than obedience to law; we should think of it also as response to action.'<sup>258</sup> This third perspective seeks to offer and explore what he considers to be the most adequate root metaphor at work in both the Biblical narrative and in contemporary life. 'In Scripture we read of divine activity in history. The important thing to be said is not that we have a law to obey or an end to achieve, but that God is acting. Ours is to be acting with the hope of responding to his action. This is something we ought to do; however we do it. The law and gospel are so related to each other that insofar as we see divine action, we respond to it. The response is not so much a goal or an obligation as it is an actuality.'<sup>259</sup>

The master metaphor and the key term in Niebuhr's own proposal is thus that of 'response-ability or responsibility; we should not think of it as it is used in legal terminology, but rather think of it as it is on the face of it: the ability to respond.'<sup>260</sup> As Niebuhr reminds us, this response-ability can take various forms: these he labels as the mechanical; the habitual or conditioned; and the command. But the one which interests him most, and which he proposes to explore, is what he calls 'the free level' of response. 'Man is unique because of his ability to answer, an ability which is within himself: when [one] does respond freely, it is not part of the self, but the whole self; it is not the society commanding, nor is it conditioning. It is free.'<sup>261</sup> In short, Niebuhr's chosen designation for the human being as ethical agent is that of 'the responsible self'.

In the Introduction to this thesis, we noted the following statement: 'The idea or pattern of responsibility, then, may summarily and abstractly be defined

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<sup>258</sup> HRN, 'Christian Ethics Lecture Notes', transcribed by his students, Yale 1952-53, p. 97.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., p. 98.



as 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; and all of this in a continuing community of agents.'<sup>262</sup> Four main points of interest are ventured in this succinct definition, one which Niebuhr feels is both applicable to life in general, and, also, specifically, to the field of Christian ethics. In general terms, these are the elements of (1) *responsiveness*; (2) *interpretation*; (3) *accountability* and (4) *social solidarity*.

In more specifically theological terms we can expound this definition of responsibility somewhat more precisely. (1) There is the affirmation that God is the determining reality of, in, and for life; an assertion or presupposition that finds classic expression in the scriptural phrase 'The LORD reigns' also rendered in theologies of a reformation type as 'The sovereignty of God'. We are called to *respond* to God's prevenient action upon us. (2) We understand ourselves as those within the creaturely realm who have the capacity for reasoned response, and not just reflex reaction or conditioned behaviour; this results from our *interpretation* of what God's address to us, or action upon us involves and implies. (3) We can say that this dialogue or relation between God and ourselves is a living and ongoing one in which we may expect or anticipate that God will have yet more things to say and do which will constitute new or surprising elements in the unfolding of his loving will for us. With the aid of the metaphor of responsibility, God's creative fidelity can be conceived as involving elements of both his divine predetermination in relation to us, shaping and sustaining our human self-determination but in such a way that his further actions may be adjusted in accordance with our answering response. God's loving sovereignty does not negate but engages in, a reciprocal relation with humans. Many aspects of prayer would, in fact, be meaningless without this notion.<sup>263</sup> This dialectical situation implies that there is a large degree of *accountability* in our past, present and future dealings with God and each other. (4) We attain this ability to interpret and thus fittingly respond, not just as isolated individuals but rather as members of a community whose experience,

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<sup>262</sup> HRN, *The Responsible Self*, op. cit., p. 65.

<sup>263</sup> George Hunsinger, 'Double Agency as a Test Case,' in *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology*, op. cit., pp. 185-224.

language and reason are continuing resources of help and guidance in the hermeneutical task. We interpret the signs of Divine Action upon us in a personal manner which is profoundly indebted to, and embedded in, a social and communal matrix. The Scriptures, and subordinately, the subsequent history of Christian witness and reflections, act as the 'community of interpretation' as we attempt to discern God's activity and respond appropriately.

For Niebuhr, then, responsibility affirms that 'God is acting in all actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action.'<sup>264</sup> Philosophically speaking, this seems to hint strongly at monism, especially as understood in its rationalist and Stoic forms.<sup>265</sup> In theological terms, it is what we have been referring to throughout as monotheism, or, in Niebuhr's preferred terminology, 'radical monotheism'. But, of course, such monotheism can be interpreted in various ways. One extreme way is to interpret God's action in such a one-sidedly mechanistic way as to introduce an overwhelming sense of fatalism such that God is entirely past and has no real living relation to either the present or the future. Certain types of Islamic and Christian theology, the latter, especially in some of its Augustinian-Calvinistic forms, can be said to illustrate this tendency. At the opposite end of the monistic or monotheistic spectrum are the more extreme versions of eschatology where God's action is so stressed in terms of what has yet to happen in the future that human life becomes almost predominantly the passive stance of waiting 'the final alteration of things. While the fatalistic view makes God all past, this view makes him all future and alive only at the eschaton.' For Niebuhr, however, in contrast, 'God's action is neither mechanistic nor finalistic, but vitalistic.'<sup>266</sup>

But this then begs the question of what form or forms God's action actually does take in relation to creation, its creatures, and within this environment, human beings? Are there certain patterns which might be discerned and

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<sup>264</sup> HRN, *The Responsible Self*, p. 126.

<sup>265</sup> Richard E. Crouter, 'H. Richard Niebuhr and Stoicism,' *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 2, 1974, pp. 124-146.

<sup>266</sup> HRN, 'Christian Ethics Lecture Notes, op. cit., p. 100. These descriptive categories may strike one as being rather too simple and sweeping, and are perhaps better taken as broad interpretive schemata.

partially described as we consider the question of how God interacts with us? Placing his own views within the context of some other proposals Niebuhr writes that ‘we cannot say that God lets his world to the determination of law and whimsy, or that He enters in only occasionally with exceptional miracles [and] supernatural events. Some would limit God’s action to events in the Scriptures, to the incarnation and to conversions. However, I would say that we are confronted with finite agencies and in them we are confronted with the intention and the ordering of intentions by the Infinite. To say that one part and it only is the working of God is to think of God as a finite being. We must look at the whole; the meaning of the Passion and of the action of Judas cannot be known simply by looking at the action of Judas, or at the action of Peter, or even solely at the action of Jesus Christ. There is one pattern to salvation; what God is doing can be known only through the whole plan.’<sup>267</sup>

Once again, then, we are finding evidence of Niebuhr’s perennial refrain, namely, that God’s intentions and actions all have a unity of purpose. ‘Christianity asserts the presence of the one in the many; it asserts that there is a “uni-verse”. God is one and is acting; we must see this to get the view, lest we first fight this devil and then adore that deity – seeing no connection between this and that.’<sup>268</sup> Niebuhr makes extensive and repeated reference here, and elsewhere in his corpus, to the insights of the so-called ‘Second Isaiah’ where the unity of God’s actions within history, especially as it involves Israel, is given perhaps its most profound expression in the Old Testament; an interpretation which the New Testament only serves to reinforce by concentrating its reflections upon the person and work of Jesus Christ within this monotheistic framework. This is, in effect, Niebuhr’s call for us to refuse to succumb to fragmented, partial or imbalanced interpretations of divine activity. Instead, he asks us to ‘use a larger hypothesis to explain all things: God is acting as Creator, as King and as Savior.’<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., p. 101. Note again the close affinities with Brueggemann who argues that Israel’s normative interpretive strategy in its canonical testimony ‘is organized around an active verb that bespeaks an action that is transformative, intrusive, or inverting.’ Israel’s ‘God-talk’ is therefore characteristically rendered in Hebrew such that God’s action is depicted in active, causative verbs in the *hiph’il* stem, and his presence expressed in ‘nominal sentences, sentences

One might want to question whether Niebuhr's choice of the word 'explain' was just a bit too ambitious in the above quotation, but that aside, what is clear is that Niebuhr is arguing strongly for an interpretation which stresses the unity of divine intention and activity. In the varied multiplicity of what we encounter and experience 'we must respond to each action as a part of a whole: not as a particular action, but in the totality of actions' in which God's action is believed to be one.<sup>270</sup> Such belief is uniquely and decisively shaped by the Bible, which Niebuhr describes as being 'the classic manual'; a 'dictionary' or 'grammar' to help us understand the ways of God.<sup>271</sup> It should also be noted that Niebuhr considers certain other writings which are chronologically subsequent to the Bible, as having an important, if derivative status, in this hermeneutical task of 'the continuing community' which consciously seeks to live in relation to God.<sup>272</sup>

As noted earlier, Niebuhr interpreted the divine action in terms of God being Creator, King and Saviour. Such terminology, which, of course, was already part of the social discourse of the context in which the biblical authors lived and wrote, serves as the means by which 'we understand and communicate' but does so, as Niebuhr notes, in the form of 'metaphors, parables, symbols and even allegories.'<sup>273</sup> This 'hermeneutical realism' allows us to interpret the ongoing relation of God's action and our 'fitting' response in terms which Niebuhr himself used in his Yale lectures over many years: namely, response to the Creative, Governing and Redemptive Action of God. These categories mean much the same as the three ones used at the start of this paragraph and will be used hereafter as we study them in more detail in the remaining sections of this chapter. It is crucial to note, however, that these terms do not represent divisions or separations, but rather distinctions within God's unified action. Nor

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without verbs' which nonetheless imply or infer divine activity, see Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, op. cit., pp. 123ff. See also Thomas F. Tracy, *God, Action and Embodiment*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1984.

<sup>270</sup> HRN, *Christian Ethics Lectures*, op. cit., p. 103.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid. For an excellent discussion of such issues see George Hunsinger, 'Beyond Literalism and Expressivism: Karl Barth's Hermeneutical Realism', in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, op. cit., pp. 210-225.

are they to be understood primarily as successive chronological stages, rather, they are best seen as simultaneous aspects of divine activity where there is believed to be a mutual coinherence of God as Creator, Governor and Redeemer.<sup>274</sup>

### 3. Response to the Redeeming Action of God

The point of putting this aspect *before* the analysis of God's creative and governing action is that, following Fowler's similar line of argument, we do not have to repeat in exhaustive detail this whole area of Niebuhr's work since it has already been covered in the previous two chapters where we looked at his *theologia crucis* from both an existential and an evangelical perspective. That earlier work is now able to pay us a nice dividend at this point of the thesis. In developing a theology, rather than trying to philosophically adopt an explicitly apologetic procedure, which would be addressed to the posture of unbelief, we can posit the fact that God in Christ does act *redemptively*, and we can therefore allow that presupposition or disposition of faith to work back with transforming effect upon our analysis of what is involved in responding to God's creative and governing actions.<sup>275</sup> One might observe that this is how the biblical authors worked: they reasoned that God's redemptive actions were already to be trusted, and *therefore*, on this presupposition were able and willing to affirm God's creative and governing actions as distinct aspects of one divine process. In temporal terms, it is of course more correct to treat these aspects in the order of response to God's creative, governing and redemptive actions, but viewed another way, the way of biblically-informed faith, the knowledge that God is the Redeemer, has arguably deeper and more far-reaching consequences than

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<sup>274</sup> Fowler suggests several influences on Niebuhr's use of these three depictions of divine character and agency. Briefly stated: Luther, Edwards, Troeltsch and Macintosh inform his ideas about 'God as the source of all being and norm of all valuing'; Tillich (structural motif) and Whitehead (process motif), together with elements of Marxist philosophy of history help shape his interpretation of God as 'the intentional structure in the processes of reality'; and the biblical witness of Old and New Testament is fundamental to his construal of God's redeeming nature and activity as well as helping shape his ideas about divine creative and governing action. Further discussion of these issues would take us well beyond this thesis: see Fowler, *op. cit.*, pp. 134-140.

<sup>275</sup> Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

any other aspect or perspective of belief. Furthermore, since we are seeking to develop throughout this thesis, an approach which takes as its leading motif the *theologia crucis*, then we are further constrained or obliged to view God's creative and governing actions from the standpoint of faith in the God who is decisively and definitively encountered in the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. As always, such faith is crucial: that is, it is *both* centred on the crucified Christ, *and* absolutely necessary to any further insights which may be derived from this locus.

In brief, what we saw in the two previous chapters was how Niebuhr offers a compelling and persuasive analysis of the faith of the social self. Our primordial relation to God is that of faith: that is, the divine intention for us is that we relate to God as our sole trustworthy value centre and supremely worthwhile common cause. Somehow, a surd posits itself in this relation. In biblical terms there is a 'fall into sin', which, in Niebuhrian terms, is described as 'the faithlessness of the social self'. The two main manifestations of this are what we called 'the *broken* faith of the social *self*' where trust is radically shattered into such various phenomena as anger, fear or evasion in relation to God; and 'the *misplaced* faith of the *social self*' where loyalty becomes diseased in its attachment to various deceptive value centres and their attendant causes in what are known as the false forms of idolatrous faith called polytheism and henotheism.

There is no prospect of self-salvation from this dreadful and drastic plight. Humanity would be doomed to destruction within this vicious circle were it not for the fact, attested in the Scriptures, that God has acted definitively and decisively in Jesus Christ, to bring about the salvation of the human creature. Through the so-called 'Christ-event' God has effected the reconciliation and redemption of humanity, an action which Niebuhr understands in terms of salvation as 'pistological transformation', namely, 'the *reconstruction of broken* faith' and 'the *redirection of misplaced* faith'. This change or conversion is the evangelical reality and perspective made possible by God's saving action in the crucified, risen and ascended Jesus who, as 'the incarnation and mediator of

faith' enables human beings to live by renewed faithfulness in the interpersonal interactions of trust and loyalty.

Niebuhr has thus presented us with a series of images of the human being which we may state conceptually as successively: the divinely-intended or primordial social self which lives faithfully by trust and loyalty; the social self fallen into existential faithlessness; and the social self transformed by God's grace in Jesus Christ to a position of renewed faithfulness whenever it 'participates in the present passion' by metanoia in a kind of 'Christo-morphic cruciformity'.<sup>276</sup> The next image in that series is now offered as the would-be faithful self, or, as is appropriate to the ethical perspective being offered here, 'the responsible self'. Since '*the social self*' becomes '*the faithful self*' through God's redeeming act in Christ, and is now to be understood as '*the responsible self*', we will analyse further what it means to respond in faith to God's creative and governing, as well as redeeming actions.

#### 4. Response to the Creative Action of God

'We are now at the subject of the creative action of God and of the human response to it in faith. We might begin by seeing that the moral life has a basis in the aesthetic. We often separate the beautiful, the true and the good, and consequently aesthetics, religion and ethics. The distinction of ethics and religion, made since the eighteenth century, is false. Religion is not merely sacred rites; neither is the ethical merely utilitarian behavior. The aesthetic, similarly, is not something we do occasionally. It is not "art for art's sake," nor is beauty something kept in a museum. The most memorable people generally have a quality we might call aesthetic. . . It is a matter of what we value and consider important. A value is that which we consider important enough to respond to. . .'<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> More detailed discussion of the term 'Christo-morphic' will be found in section 6 of this current ethical chapter; more detail on the meaning of the cognate phrases 'participation in the present passion' and 'cruciformity' will be given in section 5 of the fourth chapter on Niebuhr's ecclesiology.

<sup>277</sup> HRN, *Christian Ethics Lecture Notes*, pp. 104 – 105.

Thus, Niebuhr initiates his ethical reflections on this particular aspect of God's unified though differentiated action: response to the *creative* action of God. As will soon become clear, Niebuhr has little or no interest in questions of how exactly God may have created; one will search his writings in vain for an exegetical analysis of the literal factuality or otherwise of the biblical creation accounts in the first two chapters of Genesis. Niebuhr never seeks to be a cosmologist in any comprehensive sense of the term. Instead, employing something like the 'hermeneutical realism' which Hunsinger advocates as a more satisfactory alternative to either 'literalism' or 'expressivism',<sup>278</sup> Niebuhr is quite content to follow the main thrust of the biblical witness, and subsequent theological reflection, in accepting, as a presupposition, that God is the Creator of all that is. He therefore acknowledges God to be 'the source of being'; 'the center of value' and 'the norm of valuing': the One in relation to whom all things may be considered to be valuable since God has willed them into existence and therefore affirms his desire for them to be. Within this 'divine commonwealth' there is the intention and expectation that human beings, who themselves are valued by their creator, will also be valuing creatures.

'Yet we must recognize' observes Niebuhr, 'that our response to these [other beings] is a response in sin, in perverted faith. We must speak of our sinfulness, which has perverted our emotions. We have a perverted selectivity of what is important. We say, "This seems important; that is unimportant; I will heed the important and the beautiful and avoid the ugly, the unimportant." And we do this in a personal sort of way: we look for our own creativity and action in the things about us. We deal with other people as reflections of ourselves. How am I mirrored in them? What influence am I having on them?'<sup>279</sup> Niebuhr mentions the relation of parents to their children; pastors to their parishioners; teachers to their students and statesmen to their citizens as examples of this attitude. 'We want to say, "I have been here!" It is . . . as Luther put it in his famous quote

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<sup>278</sup> George Hunsinger, 'Beyond Literalism and Expressivism: Karl Barth's Hermeneutical Realism,' *op. cit.*, pp. 210-225.

<sup>279</sup> HRN, *Christian Ethics Lectures*, *op. cit.*, p. 105.



about us being turned in upon ourselves in self-regarding or self-centred sinfulness.<sup>280</sup>

We may summarize Niebuhr's reflections thus far, on the subject of response to the creative action of God, by saying that in faith or faithfulness, we consider other beings because of their intrinsic value to God, but that in contrast, in our perennial tendency to faithlessness we relate to other beings on the basis of their supposed instrumental value to us, a stance that is basically utilitarian and self-centred, whether that be in terms of 'self-love' or 'group-love'.<sup>281</sup> As Niebuhr poignantly concludes: 'Ultimately behind inhumanity is a lack of the aesthetic.'<sup>282</sup>

Thankfully, however, a better alternative is also available, one to which the biblical witness, in particular, attests. 'The Christian response is quite different from those which we have been condemning. . . Man is of more value than the sparrows, but the value of the sparrows is asserted. The reason they are to be valued and appreciated is not because they have a human source or because they can be used to any human end. They are valuable because they are the product of the infinite Creator. When we think of Christians, we think of grace, of a sort of graciousness.'<sup>283</sup> Several names are summoned as examples of this kind of gracious value for God's works of creation, among whom Augustine and Jonathan Edwards seem to stand highest in Niebuhr's estimate of what a non-utilitarian ethic might be like. Edwards is commended for his insight that 'the participation of a thing in Being is the highest criterion of value and appreciation.'<sup>284</sup> And Augustine is applauded for his affirmation that 'Whatever is, is good' by virtue of the very fact that God is its creator and valuer.<sup>285</sup>

An important distinction begins to emerge here, in which Niebuhr draws our attention to the differences between two common terms of evaluation, namely 'the good' and 'the right'. As Niebuhr states it: 'Whatever is, is good: this is the

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

Biblical statement. Whatever is, is right: this is the statement of conservatives, which fail[s] to see that truly things are, though good, in a wrong relation to one another. . . No matter in what form one states the Christian ethics, one must see that Whatever is, is good; but Whatever is, is not right.<sup>286</sup> What Niebuhr evidently wants to communicate is a sense that the underlying themes of the biblical narrative should be acknowledged, notably that God's creation is good; that a particular part of that creation has fallen in sin, manifesting itself in a complex network of wrong and perverted relations; yet also that God the Father is at work to redeem this condition through his Son, Jesus Christ. However, Niebuhr is also at pains to ensure that an appropriate balance is maintained, as indeed the biblical witness does, between God as creator and redeemer, thus giving a due sense of proportion, something that has not always been the case with certain theological traditions or individuals, especially those which all too easily denigrate or ignore, the creative action of God.

What then of the actual response that we make, given that we are now in a position to presuppose God's creative action? If, in agreement with the biblical witness and the Christian tradition at its best, we reflect upon this issue from the perspective of faith, as those who are being changed by the 'metanoia' (a favourite Niebuhrian term) initiated and sustained by Jesus Christ, what then does such responsibility entail? According to Niebuhr, this metanoia 'turns us from looking for our own creation to the appreciation of ever-fresh reality' a 'response of love . . . that seems to take place in stages; [or] if not in stages, at least, [having] several aspects.'<sup>287</sup> These 'stages' or 'aspects' are what Niebuhr identifies as acceptance; affirmation; understanding; cultivation and mimesis or imitation.<sup>288</sup> To each of these we now turn.

Niebuhr begins his reflections on the transformation that our value responses undergo as a consequence of faith in Christ by speaking of *acceptance*: 'acceptance is not enjoyment, but it is a far cry from despair'.<sup>289</sup> This means that some of the feelings that often threaten or diminish life, be it in relation to

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., pp. 109ff.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

ourselves or to other beings, are questioned and qualified. Acceptance breaks the strangleholds that pride, despair and frustration may place upon us. I may not like something or someone else; I may well be unhappy with various things about myself; but in acceptance I learn to live with and within the circumstances that currently prevail.

'After the stage of acceptance comes *affirmation*: one can say of the Christian ethos – that it is not ethics, but ethos, the Christian attitude to things – that it is a world-affirmation: it asserts, what is, ought to be! It is to be affirmed.'<sup>290</sup> The reason for this is that the sense of distrust, which we explored back in the chapter on faithlessness from an existential perspective, is now being turned in the direction of trust or confidence, which cannot help but issue in attitudes, and therefore also actions, of affirmation and creative intent. We decide to bring children into a world, even though we know there are hazards to confront. We recognize that our 'enemy', if he is to be understood as such in certain circumstances, is nonetheless willed and created by God, even if we are as yet unable to achieve reconciliation. We confront the fact that in the labour or prison camps of brutal regimes, there are some who still seek to affirm and conserve life as valuable and worthwhile. 'Even at the extremities, perhaps there most of all, conservatism is of value.'<sup>291</sup>

'The next stage or aspect after affirmation is *understanding*.'<sup>292</sup> Going beyond the mere acceptance that something exists; or even the notion that this other being ought to be affirmed if not necessarily loved; there is the willingness to say: 'let me look at it; let me try to understand it.'<sup>293</sup> As Niebuhr acknowledges, the change of attitude from what often comes naturally to us, especially in circumstances of hostility or suspicion, 'is indeed laborious; it requires struggle to think the thoughts of the Creator after him.'<sup>294</sup> What Niebuhr clearly has in mind here, is a perspective on knowledge which is less like 'the Baconian' one, where knowledge is power which is then bent to some

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

instrumental use; and one more like what he calls 'the Newtonian (the Keplerian) which says: there is a ratio in the world; what a wonderful world this is; therefore, let us think the thoughts of God after Him; because they are good, let man try to understand them.'<sup>295</sup> An obvious instance of this perspective is the folly, and perhaps, therefore, tragedy involved, in not seeking to understand the contextual causes and consequences of human attitudes and actions. Those who will not learn from history are all the more likely to repeat its, perhaps preventable, mistakes. The modern phenomenon of terrorism is an apt example here.

'Beyond understanding is *cultivation*.'<sup>296</sup> Making reference to the two creation accounts in Genesis, Niebuhr picks up a strand of insight from the second of these when he says: 'one response to the Creator is service and tending of his creatures. It is a response that work for one's self, egoistic work, work for some idol – be it nature, or reason – cannot be; for it does not serve the entelechy within the thing itself.'<sup>297</sup> In other words, there is a delicate balance to be struck between holding back to let things be, and also the right sort of intervention which one discerns to be appropriate, especially as one tries to discern the goal or fulfilment which God intends in each case. This holistic ethos is well expressed by Niebuhr as follows: 'If understanding is response to the Creator, cultivation and tending is response to the Redeemer: tending and ministration to the soul and mind as well as to the body.'<sup>298</sup> It is the One God whom we respond to, for in the faith stance that Niebuhr names radical monotheism, there is no ultimate separation or strife between God's creative, governing and redemptive actions. Using the responsibilities inherent in parenthood, as both an example and analogy of what he means, Niebuhr is at pains to stress that 'this is not to say we must tend all the tendencies [in our children]: it requires selectivity, elimination and transplanting.'<sup>299</sup> And extending the analogy still further he points out that '[w]hat is true in familial relations is true internationally . . . Each community has its own entelechy, its

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

own genius; we should see that each community grows in its own way. Self-determination is the way [such that our role] is to tend them and not impose upon them.<sup>300</sup>

Finally, beyond cultivation, there is what Niebuhr, quoting Aristotle's *Poetics*, calls *mimesis*. 'Mimesis is *imitation*, but not imitation of products; it is rather imitation of the action of the creator or Creator. It is doing what he does in the way we can do it.'<sup>301</sup> It is possible, therefore, maybe even desirable, that there be a kind of 'artistry' to life, neither primarily for self-aggrandizement, nor in conscious rivalry to God or others. Nonetheless, we may say that 'we are created to be creative, to be mimetic. We must realize we are limited; we cannot begin with nothing; our sense of novelty is small; but we can create. . . we can create in pride and to our destruction; or we can create in response to God, prayerfully: thanks be to God that creation is not complete, but that it continues toward us and also through us.'<sup>302</sup>

But, of course, Niebuhr's analysis begs further questions, not least regarding the value preferences that are at work as we are asked to choose from between various possible goods which one might serve or pursue. Anticipating such questions, Niebuhr considers and rejects some of the answers which are often offered in ethical discourse: these include 'the standard of perfection; the quantitative scale; the metaphysical scale; the anthropomorphic scale; the instrumental scale; the inclusive scale' etc.<sup>303</sup> Niebuhr acknowledges that several of these are used in the Scriptures without there necessarily being any final systematic resolution to the question of value preference. But if there is one predominant criterion to be discerned in the Bible, Niebuhr suggests that it is what he calls the 'Divine Scale' insofar as he interprets this in a way consistent with, or at least, compatible with, radical monotheism.<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid., pp. 114-115.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

There are several 'rules' which Niebuhr discerns when one uses this divine scale, although it should be said that they are rather more like directions than directives. Briefly stated, these are as follows: (1) remember that the fundamental choice is not so much between good and evil as it is between a greater or a lesser good. (2) You need not serve yourself, for God is already seeing to it that your needs are being met. You are thus able to live by a kind of 'self-forgetfulness'. (3) 'Serve that value which is in greatest need of your service, not that which is considered highest.' (4) 'Serve that which is at hand; serve the nearest.' (5) 'In all choice of value, one must remember that one is making a sacrifice of something sacred. Vicarious suffering is in the nature of things; one good thing is sacrificed to another.' It would seem that Niebuhr has an acute sense that even in terms of our response to the creative action of God there are contours consistent with a theology of the cross since this latter is not simply to be limited to a so-called theory of atonement but is woven into every aspect of the network of 'divine-human-otherkind' relations. The Christian life is therefore a kind of *theologia crucis*, as we have been expounding the matter throughout this thesis. 'Sacrifice is a rule of existence . . . therefore, since we live through destruction of goods, since our lives are mixed with good and evil, we must offer that which we use in penance and sorrow to God and his glory.'<sup>305</sup> Even creation and creativity implies and involves the cross. Luther's motto, 'Crux probat omnia' applies here too, for redemption and creation are closely and inextricably linked.<sup>306</sup>

## 5. Response to the Governing Action of God

The second subject in Niebuhr's lecture series on Christian ethics was that of the response to divine *governance*, but, as has already been explained earlier on in this chapter, this aspect has been held back to now since we had certain logical, that is to say, 'theo-logical' reasons for dealing first with response to

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

<sup>306</sup> This theme will be addressed further in section 4 of the fifth chapter in this thesis where we will look more closely at the 'ecological' aspects of Niebuhr's ecumenical ethic.

God's redemptive and creative actions. 'What we are concerned with here is not only the fact that we have many companions to which we respond – in praise, in adulation, in appreciation, and also in bitterness, in condemnation and in hatred – but we are concerned with companions who limit our existence by their existence. We are finite; we not only die, but we transcend ourselves and know that we die; this leads to anxiety. The anxiety of which we speak is not so much the anxiety of those who know they have boundaries as it is the anxiety of those who know they are being bound.'<sup>307</sup>

These boundaries or limitations take many different forms. Since we and all our other companions are created beings, that is, are limited in terms of space and time, there is a mutual impingement constantly going on in the world which has profound, indeed, inescapable consequences for us all. As temporal creatures, we are born without our own consent, brought into existence by parents who radically condition our genetic makeup as well as the context in which we are nurtured. As physical creatures, we are effected by, and also effect in turn, the environment in which we live. As social creatures, we are shaped by, but also, to a lesser extent, contribute to, the ethos or culture of a given community, often exacerbating the self-defensiveness that one such social grouping feels or encourages in relation to others. As rational creatures, we are able to consciously reflect upon the multi-faceted experiences and aspirations that belong to the life of the human being, but our reason is in some ways limited or conditioned by passions, emotions, drives and instincts.

Niebuhr here picks up a clue from the history of language, putting this to helpful use in his exploration of what it means to respond to the governing action of God. He reminds us that '[t]he word, suffering, originally meant merely, being acted upon.'<sup>308</sup> To live is to act upon other created beings, who will, in turn, act upon us. Often this will take the form of limitation or impingement which will be experienced and interpreted as pain, whether it be physical, emotional, mental, moral or social. In other words, to be human, means to suffer, to act upon and be acted upon by others.

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<sup>307</sup> HRN, *Christian Ethics Lectures*, op. cit., p.117.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

Niebuhr now puts this into the sort of context he has been expounding throughout his lectures on Christian ethics. 'A great deal of our moral action involves teleological thinking; we set up goals and then find ourselves thwarted. We have ideas about a profession; then, our father dies and we must take care of the family. We get ready to build the kingdom of God and along comes a world war. We have beautiful schemes for social justice and socialism, and we have a depression, in which those who ought to be busy bringing it to pass are selling apples to keep alive. Other moral action, we think of deontologically. We have a law, "Thou shalt not kill." But people are killed and we are faced with the problem of what to do with the killer. Most of our conscious moral life has to do with emergency situations about which our ideal ethical systems have nothing to say; yet our real ethic is seen in our response to these emergency situations. The lack of integrity, the discontinuity between study and life, between the ethics of Sunday and the practice of Monday, is largely due to our failure to see that our real ethics are those we practice in life. It is this ethics, the ethics we show forth in our life, about which we should talk and study.'<sup>309</sup>

We have already seen Niebuhr's preference for monistic rather than dualistic schemes of interpretation, as one would expect, given the logic of radical monotheism. In this regard, he expounds with great appreciation, the Stoic ethical tradition, implying that here, we have a greater wisdom than is possible in dualistic ethical theories, especially when life's emergencies impinge upon us. According to Niebuhr, 'The Stoic says: Stop, look and listen before you respond [to external aggression] with anger, fear and grief; accept the truth that there is reason in all things, both within and without; it is rational; you are rational; therefore, accept what happens to you as rational, as a rational being.'

<sup>310</sup> Spinoza, whom Niebuhr considers to be the greatest of the Stoics, suggests that 'our emotions are cleansed when we realize that we are intended; bitterness arises from the belief that particular events have will behind them. Further, we cause ourselves unnecessary anxiety when we think that other people are as concerned about us as we are about ourselves.' In doing so we try to 'see the

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid., p.120; also Richard E. Crouter, 'H. Richard Niebuhr and Stoicism,' op. cit.



logos in the nature of things.<sup>311</sup> We seek to 'ascend above emotional reaction' to that 'intellectual love of God' in which we respond in acceptance of the field of interactions in which we participate.

What Niebuhr appreciates and appropriates from Spinoza is the fundamental notion that 'reality is one; there is one will behind the multiplicity; we are dealing with one reality in all the experiences of life.'<sup>312</sup> However, in Spinoza's system of thought, this is mostly rendered in mathematical principles. This prompts Niebuhr to define his own position in relation to the great Stoic thus: 'We will use the idea of patterns, of the logos, from Spinoza, but we will hold that the idea of person is higher than the idea of geometry. I will not reduce myself to pure intelligence. I will see that there is something more characteristic than reason in the nature of things. The world is the Kingdom of God; God is King; he does something like a ruler does.'<sup>313</sup> God governs his creation, a relation interpreted by Niebuhr more in terms of Hebraic than Greek idioms. 'The Hebrew sees God as the counterpart, not so much of the thinking self, as of the moral self, the self that makes contracts, swearing to his own hurt and not changing.'<sup>314</sup> The primary symbol to be employed here, then, is that of reality as being like 'a society, a kingdom, a polis, a republic.'<sup>315</sup>

God's governing action is thus the 'postulate' or 'presupposition' that we make use of in our interpretation of life. Such divine governance involves several things. One is that 'God is present in judgment.'<sup>316</sup> Clearly, for any community or society to function properly there must be some sort of moral standard or framework in existence. There is a necessary, even desirable truth in this. And yet, the idea of justice taking structural form in practices of judgement which must deal with instances of criminality, often leads to a hardened form of dualism in which punishment for wrongdoing and reward for virtue becomes the predominant paradigm of thought and legislation. Experience proves that in its more simplistic forms this leads to a reductionist understanding of human

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<sup>311</sup> HRN, *Christian Ethics Lectures*, op. cit., p. 121-122.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

selves and their societies. In certain religious interpretations, it is transposed and inflated into an eschatology of divine reward and punishment based on the dualism of heaven and hell. Niebuhr acknowledges the scriptural precedents for this but also takes note of, and clearly favours, those biblical texts which question the ultimate adequacy of this dualism, citing Job, Second Isaiah and passages in the Pauline corpus as just a few of many possible examples. Furthermore, the logic, both theological, and thus eschatological, of his radically monotheistic interpretation of God's gracious sovereignty in Jesus Christ, leads him to different emphases, in contrast to the dualisms mentioned above.

God's governing action, therefore, does involve the will to justice or judgement. But as Niebuhr notes: 'The Kingdom of God is not simply justice, even as government is not merely the administration of law. Human government has many ends, not just justice: it seeks welfare, security, freedom etc.'<sup>317</sup> God's governing action may thus be understood as the comprehensive context, the unassailable wisdom, the one will which works within, upon and beyond all aspects of creation, so as to order it into a form or pattern which corresponds to the rule and realm of God.

'What then is the end of divine government?'<sup>318</sup> Niebuhr offers an intriguing, and, at first glance, quite surprising answer to this question: 'It is the production of novelty.'<sup>319</sup> A series of biblical quotes are brought to our attention here in support of this view: Isaiah 42:9; 43:19; 48:6; 62:2; 65:17; 66:22. Interestingly, biblical scholars believe that these chapters were written in response to some of the great emergencies through which Israel passed: the exile in Babylon and subsequent reconstruction of Jewish society centred at Jerusalem and its environs. 'Creation did not cease: "I am always bringing forth a new thing", says the Lord. Here in the midst of destruction, something new is always being brought forth. Human beings, as we know, must sometimes be placed upon the anvil and beaten into nobility. Persons come into being in trial

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<sup>317</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid.

and tribulation: Hebrews 12:6ff; Revelation 3:19. Chastening is necessary for creation of being. Why? God knows. But we know that suffering can be creative.' Niebuhr quotes approvingly the poet John Keats who reckoned that this world is not so much a Vale of Tears as 'the Vale of Soul-making'.<sup>320</sup>

As he was often fond of saying, Niebuhr regarded the Christian ethics of response to the governing action of God as being primarily 'emergency ethics', that is, 'our responses to the limitations of life'.<sup>321</sup> He observes that most of the great 'devotional books' or 'classics of Christianity' deal more with 'adversity, poverty, torment etc, and with what to do in response to these' than striving after the goals of life or following some great rule.<sup>322</sup> It is in those situations where people are put to the test that they 'realize what life really is all about' prompting us, in the process, to engage in 'rational [and] systematic interpretation of these same problems; namely, ethics'.<sup>323</sup>

In the introduction to this thesis, where we offered a brief sketch of Niebuhr's life and work, we noted that he lived through, and wrestled with, some of the greatest crises of the twentieth century, in particular, the second world war. Professional intellectual though he was, Niebuhr had anything but a detached and merely academic interest in these issues; if anything, he indwelt them with such deeply existential intensity and sensitivity that he suffered profoundly as a result, the most extreme manifestation being the several months of hospitalisation he underwent in 1944. And yet, ironically, it was his grappling with such contemporary crises that enabled Niebuhr to explore some potentially rich interpretations of these, and similar, events and experiences. Indeed, in Fowler's opinion: 'In his effort to discern God's action in the war, and to understand how Christians might respond so as to respond to God's action in it, Niebuhr came to a depth of insight and clarity of vision which, in my judgment, stand in almost direct continuity with biblical prophecy.'<sup>324</sup> To

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<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid., pp. 124-125.

<sup>324</sup> Fowler, op.cit., p. 184.

some of these crises, and to the crucial insights that were consequently wrung from Niebuhr's almost tortured mind, we now turn.

The first large-scale social crisis that evoked a public response from Niebuhr was the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in the early 1930's. In a celebrated exchange of views with his brother Reinhold, Niebuhr began to articulate the radically monotheistic position that was to become characteristic of his theology and ethics thereafter. Analysing the prevailing responses to the brewing international crisis, Niebuhr found flaws in each of the viewpoints being argued. But it is his dispute with his brother Reinhold over the appropriate course of action in the Manchurian crisis which is most pertinent to our present analysis in that it opens up some vital perspectives on their respective theologies of history, and, in particular, how one should interpret, and thus respond to, God's governing action.<sup>325</sup>

The main analogy that Richard Niebuhr employs in his initial article *The Grace of Doing Nothing* is that of the then contemporary communism to which he had recent in-depth exposure to on his trip to Europe, including Russia. Niebuhr characterises the inactivity of the radical Christian faith that he espouses as follows, in contrast to his brother Reinhold's more muscular interventionism:

There is yet another way of doing nothing. It appears to be highly impracticable because it rests on the well nigh obsolete faith that there is a God – a real God. Those who follow this way share with communism the belief that the fact that men can do nothing constructive is no indication of the fact that nothing constructive is being done. Like the communists they are assured that the actual processes of history will inevitably and really bring a different kind of world with lasting peace. They do not rely on human aspirations after ideals to accomplish this end, but on forces which often

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<sup>325</sup> HRN, 'The Grace of Doing Nothing,' *The Christian Century* 49, 1932, pp. 378-380; 'A Communication: The Only Way into the Kingdom of God,' *The Christian Century* 49, p. 447. For his brother's contribution see Reinhold Niebuhr, 'Must We Do Nothing?' *The Christian Century* 49, pp. 415-417. See also John D. Barbour, 'Niebuhr versus Niebuhr: The Tragic Nature of History,' *The Christian Century* 101, 1984, pp. 1096-1099.

seem very impersonal . . . [yet] as parts of the real world they are as much a part of the divine process as are human thoughts and prayers.<sup>326</sup>

Niebuhr affirms 'the meaningfulness of reality [in that] the history of the world is the judgment of the world, and also its redemption.' But the austerity of his prophetic insight is apparent when he writes that '[t]his God of things as they are is inevitable and quite merciless. His mercy lies beyond, not this side of, judgment.'<sup>327</sup> However, unlike the perennial tendency of other philosophies or programmes, including that of communism, towards self-righteousness, Niebuhr argues that the type of radical Christian stance that he is recommending may prove to be a less moralistic alternative since its posture of 'repentance' or rigorous 'self-analysis' will help to mitigate or eliminate just such an attitude. He concludes his argument in this important article thus:

The inactivity of radical Christianity is not the inactivity of those who call evil good; it is the inaction . . . of those who do not judge their neighbors because they cannot fool themselves into a sense of superior righteousness. It is not the inactivity of a resigned patience, but of a patience that is full of hope, and is based on faith. It is not the inactivity of the non-combatant, for it knows that there are no non-combatants, that everyone is involved, that China is being crucified . . . by our sins and those of the whole world. It is not the inactivity of the merciless, for works of mercy must be performed though they are only palliatives to ease present pain while the process of healing depends on deeper, more actual and urgent forces.

But if there is no God, or if God is up in heaven and not in time itself, it is a very foolish activity.<sup>328</sup>

At the request of the editor of the *Christian Century*, Niebuhr's brother, Reinhold, was invited to write a critical response to this article in which the main difference that he argues for is the type of military interventionism that was often synonymous with his so-called 'Christian realism.'<sup>329</sup> But to Richard Niebuhr's mind, and more particularly, for the purposes of this aspect of our

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<sup>326</sup> HRN, 'The Grace of Doing Nothing,' p. 379.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid., p. 380.

<sup>329</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, 'Must We Do Nothing?' *The Christian Century*, 49, 1932, pp. 415-417.

thesis, the crucial question turned more on the nature of God's governing action. It is 'whether "the history of mankind is a perennial tragedy" which can derive meaning only from a goal which lies beyond history, as my brother maintains, or whether the "eschatological" faith, to which I seek to adhere, is justifiable. In that faith tragedy is only the prelude to fulfilment, and a prelude which is necessary because of human nature; the kingdom of God comes inevitably, though whether we shall see it or not, depends on our recognition of its presence and our acceptance of the only kind of life which will enable us to enter it, the life of repentance and forgiveness'.<sup>330</sup>

Reinhold Niebuhr, in both his long-running fraternal argument with his brother, and the article cited above, believes that God is external to, or beyond the historic process, in response to which Richard tries to make his own position yet more clear and distinct:

But God, I believe, is always in history, he is the structure of things, the source of all meaning, the "I am that I am," that which is that it is. He is the rock against which we beat in vain, that which bruises and overwhelms us when we seek to impose our wishes, contrary to his, upon him. That structure of the universe, that creative will, can no more be said to interfere brutally in history than the violated laws of my own organism can be said to interfere brutally with my life if they make me pay the cost of my violation. That structure of the universe, that will of God, does bring war and depression upon us when we bring it upon ourselves, for we live in the kind of world which visits our iniquities upon us and our children, no matter how much we pray and desire that it be otherwise.<sup>331</sup>

In this kind of world, as Niebuhr envisages it, human self-interest will inevitably, if not always immediately and obviously, rebound at great and destructive cost. It is as though he understands God as letting certain processes within the created order run their destructive course, not out of vindictiveness

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<sup>330</sup> HRN, 'A Communication: The Only Way into the Kingdom,' *The Christian Century*, 49, 1932, p. 447.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.* Note the Tillichian overtones here, where God is likened to an almost impersonal unconditioned structure which (who?) nonetheless intends and acts so that righteousness will ultimately prevail in the historical sphere. See Fowler, *op. cit.*, pp. 134ff. Such emphases are in constant tension with a more 'personalist' aspect in Niebuhr's thought, derived primarily from the biblical witness.

but out of a greater desire to let the divine righteousness be ultimately vindicated, and, at certain times and places, be anticipated within history as well. This seems to be the logic at work when Niebuhr continues:

But this same structure in things which is our enemy is our redeemer; "it means intensely and means good" – not the good which we desire, but the good which we would desire if we were good and really wise. History is not a perennial tragedy but a road to fulfilment and that fulfilment requires the tragic outcome of every self-assertion, for it is a fulfilment which can only be designated as "love." It has created fellowship in atoms and organisms at bitter cost to electrons and cells; and it is creating something better than human selfhood but at bitter cost to that selfhood. This is not faith in progress for evil grows as well as good and every self-assertion must be eliminated somewhere and somehow – by innocence suffering for guilt, it seems'.<sup>332</sup>

The above passage demonstrates Niebuhr's sensitive appreciation of the hurt and pain that belongs inescapably in our relation to God, even or especially when faith allows one to perceive that the same God who appears at times to be our enemy, is really, in fact, working in gracious and tenacious ways at our redemption. God's governing action derives its inner logic from what we have throughout been calling the *theologia crucis*.

A year after this celebrated exchange with his brother Reinhold, Niebuhr read a most remarkable paper to the American Theological Society in New York, on 21<sup>st</sup> April 1932. The paper was entitled *The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus*. It remained unpublished throughout Niebuhr's life but, with the permission of his wife and son, it was edited and introduced by Diane Yeager in *The Journal of Religious Ethics*.<sup>333</sup> In it, Niebuhr seems to have come to a new degree of insight and conviction about faith in God's governance as this may be discerned in the crucial figure for a Christian understanding of the matter, namely Jesus. His paper offers a penetrating, though not unsympathetic critique of some of the leading representatives of the then prevailing ethos in North America, of liberal theology and the social gospel. But for our present purposes,

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<sup>332</sup> Ibid.

<sup>333</sup> HRN, 'The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus,' edited and with an introduction by Diane M. Yeager, *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 16, 1988, pp. 109-127.

it is Niebuhr's alternative depiction that helps to further flesh out our understanding of response to God's governing action in history. Thus:

We have characterized the mind of Jesus according to the social gospel as the mind of a humanistic or perfectionistic, pacifistic, and progressive moralist. We may describe the mind of Jesus which is not in the social gospel as the mind of a God-centered, apocalyptic, revolutionary strategist. . . Penetrate through the apocalyptic symbol to its meaning and we find, not what the liberals or the social gospel want us to find, an ethical teacher proclaiming humanitarian morality and relatively painless progress toward the Family of God, but a prophet of doom and deliverance who sees impending in the events of his time a revelation of the destructive God who is at the same time man's deliverer.<sup>334</sup>

As Niebuhr continues, this is a 'Jesus whose thoughts were directed not in the first instance to what man ought to do and in the second place to what aid he might receive from God in doing what he ought to do, but rather toward what God was doing and what man ought to do in the light of God's doing. God's doing – not what God ought to do in order that he might live up to the expectations men had of him – stands in the center of Jesus' mind. God for him is not the moral ideal but rather cosmic reality. He is the God of Job rather than the God of Plato.'<sup>335</sup> This God whom Jesus knows and makes known is the one who rules over and works within both nature and the socio-historic process, but it is the latter of these two spheres in which Niebuhr particularly discerns the divine sovereignty.

It is here that the rule of God comes to be of decisive importance and the meaning of eschatology lies largely in this, that it represents history not as an indeterminate sequence of events where men may adjust themselves to a relatively stable environment and to each other, but as a driving, directional movement ruthless so far as individuals and nations are concerned, almost impersonal in its determinism. The God of history plays no favorites with the Jews; the children of the kingdom may be cast into the outer darkness. He does not stop even for women who are with child nor because winter adds further woes to his judgment. This God of history, to whom the

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<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 119-120.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.



mind of Jesus is directed, is not the head of a family endeavouring to cement its members together by infinite kindness. He is a destructive as well as a constructive God. He is a rock which falls with crushing weight; he is the God, let us remember, who previously had directed Babylonians and Assyrians to destroy Jerusalem and Samaria. Evidently now he is directing the Romans to repeat the judgment. At all events, he will destroy Jerusalem which does not know the things which belong to its peace. That his rule is becoming manifest calls first of all not for rejoicing and celebration but for fear and repentance.<sup>336</sup>

The God of the liberal Jesus exists merely for the sake of human life and morality, but worthy though this seems, it leads to a subtle misunderstanding whereby God is only ever construed as being friend, or saviour or father. Rather different is the God of Jesus the Jew, 'the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the reality *which is that which it is*. He is the God of Amos, Isaiah, and Micah, terrible in his judgments. He is not the synthetic unity of goodness, truth, and beauty nor a first cause but [is] faithful, that is, unswerving, reality with laws that can only be broken at the price of life'.<sup>337</sup>

But though Jesus understands God in the manner of Jewish prophetic faith, he also does so as a representative of that robust yet pious Judaism that we often find attested in the psalms. Thus Jesus 'unites the two elements . . . in a true synthesis, the fear of God and the love of God, the knowledge of God the enemy and the knowledge of God the deliverer. The manifestation of the rule of God in the events of his time calls not for repentance only but also for rejoicing. There is a bad time coming; there is also a good time coming. The two events cannot be separated from each other. The slayer may be trusted because he is the bringer of life. The life-giving father, however, cannot be separated from the destroying judge. It is one and the same process which damns and saves – not a father who slays and a son who gives life, not a righteousness which condemns and a love which redeems – but one God with one faithful working'.<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid., p. 120-121.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid., p. 121. We may recall from chapter 1 that Niebuhr borrowed from Whitehead the notion of God being known as 'void, enemy and companion.' See Fowler, op. cit., p. 59.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

As Niebuhr interprets him, therefore, Jesus lives as a revolutionary since he understands God's revolutionary rule as the decisive factor in history, thus requiring human beings to live faithfully, and respond appropriately, to the continuous in-breaking of this relentless, yet ultimately redemptive, sovereign reality. Human nature finds itself perennially tempted to evade the thrusting initiative of God's righteous rule and in a myriad of ways settles down into patterns of life that become self-centred, with the almost inevitable tendency to a stifling status quo in which the divine intent for comprehensive historical well-being is thwarted. But God's 'disruptive grace'<sup>339</sup> comes to effect the necessary changes which we find so unwelcome or even distressing since we are far more comfortable with the continuities, whether slow or speedy, of life. But God's way, discerned by, and demonstrated in Jesus, is often by means of discontinuity, even through those ruptures that seem most like a revolution. As Niebuhr puts it:

A revolution is an event which has [an] end character, not as the "telos" toward which men strive, but as the "eschaton" which terminates striving, not by fulfilment but by complete denial. In that sense death is the great revolution in the life of the individual; the end of a national existence, the end of a civilization, is the great revolution in the life of social groups. Jesus' mind is directed toward such an end, an "eschaton," in the existence of his people. Jerusalem will be destroyed, its inhabitants scattered. And like the prophets before him, he does not merely seek to read moral meanings into this impending catastrophe; he accepts it rather from the hands of God and reads the meanings that are in it. The God of Jesus here is neither the kind father whose concern is the welfare of his people nor the transcendent ideal or source. He is the dynamic driving force immanent in the events of time; he is the judge, the destroyer.

But Jesus the revolutionary Jew sees . . . that the end was also a new beginning and that end and new beginning together offered an opportunity for entrance into a better life, opportunity for the fulfilment of the great prophetic hope. Let men accept the end as judgment and the new beginning as mercy, let them yield to it as those who accept, let them have faith, and they may enter into the Kingdom of God.<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> The phrase is George Hunsinger's from the book of the same name.

<sup>340</sup> HRN, 'The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus,' p. 122.

For Niebuhr, then, Jesus so depicted, is not so much a moralist, in the pejorative meaning of that term, but rather a strategist, one whose imperatives were more about being alert and expectant in trust and hope to the new possibilities which God's revolutionary actions were bringing to birth, rather than aspiring to realise some self-projected ideals or supinely conforming to the observance of a set of divinely-given laws moralistically construed. Concerning the former of these two, as he sees it, false alternatives, Niebuhr writes that 'the difference between a hope and an ideal is tremendous. An ideal is an end toward which we strive; a hope is a termination which is given, cannot be achieved. To act in the light of an assured hope is not to engineer a direct road toward the "telos" but rather to prepare oneself for a gift, so that one will not miss its possibilities. The strategic approach to life, in opposition to the teleological, consists in such preparations for taking advantage of gifts which the situation gives us and in adjusting ends to means rather than means to ends.'<sup>341</sup>

Regarding the other ethical option alluded to above, namely moral perfectionism in the form of obedience to divine laws, an ethics often associated with, or even equated with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Niebuhr argues as follows:

Jesus does not demand that men love their brethren because from a transcendent perspective all men are equal, but because the God of the historic and cosmic process is one who avenges all lovelessness, all lack of forgiveness, because selfishness [and] self-assertion lead to destruction. The laws of God are not the laws of moral perfection, but the laws of reality. The Sermon on the Mount does not tell men what to do in order that they may live up to a moral ideal, but what to do in a world where hatred as well as murder, lasciviousness as well as adultery, have terribly destructive consequences. The morality of the Sermon on the Mount does not stand on its own bottom; it stands upon the foundations of reality. The cosmic God rather than the moral God is the presupposition of that counsel, but certainly a cosmic God whose laws have been apprehended and partly set forth, though incompletely, in the Mosaic laws of morality.<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Ibid., pp. 122-123.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

So how then does Niebuhr characterise the Christian revolutionary strategy that he sees embodied in Jesus? The answer he offers is one that is entirely consistent with the by now familiar contours of the *theologia crucis*, which we have been presenting throughout; that is, 'it centers in the principles of repentance, faith, forgiveness, and innocence suffering for guilt. It is impossible for man to take the kingdom by violence, by self-assertion; he has no means adequate to this purpose. But it is possible for him, in repentance, to anticipate the judgment, to give up the attempt to preserve or extend the dying system and so to hasten its destruction. Yet such repentance is only possible to faith which sees deliverance beyond the judgment.'<sup>343</sup> This Niebuhrian rendering, it seems to me, is remarkably congruent or consistent with the central thrust of the various New Testament authors.

In reply to the possible charge that he reckons some people might make, namely, that in criticising the liberal picture of Jesus, he has swung back towards a kind of fundamentalism, Niebuhr is at pains to make the following careful distinctions. 'Fundamentalism consisted in the substitution of symbols for that which they meant; liberalism, in the substitution of new meanings without changing symbols – as in the case of the Kingdom of God which was used to mean brotherhood of man. We are interested in what we believe to be the old *meanings* and reject both the new meanings and the deification of such symbols as Christ, Bible, cross, virgin birth.'<sup>344</sup>

Niebuhr hastens to his concluding paragraph, a long statement in which he encapsulates some of his deepest convictions regarding how God's governing action is mediated to us by Jesus, who is the paradigm of what it means to be a faithful and responsible social self in the flux of historical life. Niebuhr elsewhere, following Calvin<sup>345</sup>, speaks of the 'self-denial' or revolutionary restraint that is characteristic of such a disposition. Fowler uses the innovative suggestion of Niebuhr's son, Richard R., to speak of the responsible self being

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>345</sup> HRN, *Christian Ethics Lectures*, op. cit., p. 126 with reference to Calvin's Institutes: Book 3, Chapter 7, 'The Sum of the Christian Life: Self-Denial.'

rendered here as "patient" and "counter-actor" vis-à-vis the sovereign action of God.<sup>346</sup> And so, Niebuhr concludes this complex but crucial essay thus:

To recapture the faith of Jesus is to recapture faith in the God of the creative process, the dynamic urge in the moving universe, which brings death and destruction to those who will not yield to its universal, faithful working, which heals and forgives and makes ever new beginnings possible. Jesus had faith, as the social gospel had faith, that "earth shall be fair and all men glad and wise." But Jesus knew what the social gospel forgot, that gladness and wisdom are gifts bestowed, not ends for engineers, and that they wait upon our willing obedience to the inevitable ways of a power not ourselves that makes for a glory which is not human glory. He saw that the strategy of the nations and classes who sought rough justice through the assertion of interests led to their quick destruction if they were weak, and to their slower but no less certain destruction if they were strong, for both the strong and the weak are weak before the power that moves in the creation. The only strategy apt in the human situation was for him a strategy based on a hope which did not evade death and judgment, but saw beyond them, and on a faith which did not deny the destructiveness of the cosmic God but included it. On this faith and hope was built, we believe, the social gospel in the mind of Jesus, and on it alone, we believe, the only adequate social gospel can be built.<sup>347</sup>

The prophetic nature of this essay, which, in its own way, and despite Niebuhr's occasional asides to the contrary, is remarkably similar to Barth's evolving and contemporary theology, anticipates another series of articles which Niebuhr wrote during the Second World War. These so-called 'war articles' have been the subject of much critical scrutiny and acclaim. Here we will mine them for material which is particularly pertinent to our current theme, noting their continuity with, but also deepening of, the insights that Niebuhr has previously articulated.<sup>348</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> Fowler, *op. cit.*, p. 142 writes: 'In this somewhat archaic usage the term [patient] denotes the self as the object or recipient of action upon it. As "patient" the self both "endures" and "enjoys" God's action as process-structural reality.'

<sup>347</sup> HRN, 'The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus,' pp. 126-127.

<sup>348</sup> HRN, 'War as the Judgment of God,' *The Christian Century* 59, 1942, pp. 630-633; 'Is God in the War?' *The Christian Century* 59, 1942, pp. 953-955; 'War as Crucifixion,' *The Christian Century* 60, 1943, pp. 513-515.

Niebuhr begins his reflections by once again asserting the biblically-informed monotheistic basis of his own interpretations and welcoming the fact that this same presupposition is being shared by many of his contemporaries. He notes that it is therefore 'a healthy sign . . . when God rather than the self or the enemy is seen as the central figure in the great tragedy of war and when the question, "What must I do?" is preceded by the question, "What is God doing?" To attend to God's action is to be on the way to that constructive understanding and constructive human reaction which the prophets initiated and Jesus set forth in its fullness.'<sup>349</sup> There may well be much disagreement and uncertainty about how the divine intention and action are to be interpreted but 'something has been gained as a result of the very general recognition that God is judging the nations, the churches and all mankind in this great conflict and crucifixion.'<sup>350</sup> Niebuhr's own fine line of interpretation is one that he now asks rhetorically, and then proceeds to articulate thus, an argument that warrants extensive quotation:

What does it mean to say that this war is a judgment of God on the nations or on all of us? It cannot mean simply that it is the action of a Being who, in primitive human fashion, executes vengeance. Since Hosea's time that interpretation has been rationally impossible. Christians in particular must be convinced by their whole gospel that judgment cannot be separated from redemption, that the harshness of God is not antagonistic to his love but subordinate to it, that divine "penology" is reconstructive and not vindictive in its nature.

The fundamental Christian assumption about divine justice may be stated in another way by saying that it is never merely punishment for sins, as though God were concerned simply to restore the balance between men by making those suffer who have inflicted suffering, but that it is always primarily punishment of sinners who are to be chastened and changed in the character which produced the sinful acts. Therefore war cannot be interpreted as hell; if it were hell we could not even be aware that God is judging us for we would be without God in war. War as judgment of God is a purgatory, not a hell.

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<sup>349</sup> HRN, 'War as the Judgment of God,' op. cit., p. 630.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

Christians cannot interpret God's action in war as the judgment of vengeance for another and profounder reason: the pains of war do not descend primarily on the unjust but on the innocent. Wars are crucifixions. It is not the mighty, the guides and leaders of nations and churches, who suffer most in them, but the humble, little people who have had little to do with the framing of great policies. Even the pacifists in jail have little reason to think of themselves as the martyrs of war when they reflect on all the children, wives and mothers, humble obedient soldiers, peasants on the land, who in the tragedy of war are made an offering for sin.<sup>351</sup>

Niebuhr ponders the possibility of developing 'a social theory and application of the atonement' here, and one could argue that, in effect he is, even though his disclaimer to the contrary is rather ambivalent. But what he does suggest is that a properly Christian interpretation will discern 'that the justice of God is not only a redemptive justice in which suffering is used in the service of remaking but it is also vicarious in its method, so that the suffering of innocence is used for the remaking of the guilty. One cannot then speak of God acting in this war as judge of the nations without understanding that it is through the cross of Christ more than through the cross of thieves that he is acting upon mankind.'<sup>352</sup>

At least one critic published a response to Niebuhr's article in which he raised a number of objections to which Niebuhr was given an opportunity to reply. One point worth noting is that Niebuhr's correspondent in this exchange, the philosopher, Professor Virgil Aldrich, mixes together insights from both Niebuhr's article and an editorial from the editor of *The Christian Century*, and in fact quotes more from the editor than from Niebuhr. Our main interest, however, lies in Niebuhr's nuanced and penetrating rejoinder, in which he identifies and addresses four main points.

Firstly, Niebuhr defends the use of the term "judgment". Aldrich and others are uncomfortable with it because for them it seems to mean "emotionally motivated vengeance" of an irrationally and vindictive bent. Niebuhr, however, defines it according to his interpretation of its scriptural use, that is, 'the

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<sup>351</sup> Ibid., p. 631.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid.

corrective action of a God who is loyal to his creatures'.<sup>353</sup> Niebuhr says that he would be prepared to drop the term for some other appropriate symbol, but warns that whatever one Aldrich might care to provide will still 'hurt as much' as judgment, biblically understood, does.

Secondly, Niebuhr denies the charge that he is trying to understand the war "from God's point of view." Instead, Niebuhr claims that his is a more modest interpretive strategy for he 'has been persuaded that if he is to make any sense out of his experience and life he must always try to discover the universal in every particular and respond to it.' For him, Niebuhr, that universal is the 'being and action which Jesus called Father' who, as the synoptic gospel writers testify, is encountered as acting more in 'objective, natural and historical events' than in the internal subjectivity of human feelings or emotions.<sup>354</sup>

Thirdly, since we are thus 'placed under the judgment of objective reality' more so than merely or primarily looking for God's action within us, we are affirming a stance that Niebuhr calls 'radical monotheism' in which we 'meet everything that happens with the faith that God is one and universal.' Aldrich, and other subjectivists, too easily fall prey to an insidious 'dualism' in which at some stages or in some areas, 'there is an actuality in which God is not' thus denying, in these contexts at least, that 'a rational, meaningful response' is possible. For Niebuhr, on the other hand, to 'look for God's judgment is to affirm as radical monotheists that there is no person, no situation, no event in which the opportunity to serve God is not present.' Consequently, there will likely be a greater sense of rationality and consistency about such responses.<sup>355</sup> For Niebuhr, the notion of sin as *hamartia* or 'missing the mark' was of great significance. For him, therefore, ethics were a means of helping humans become better equipped at 'hitting the target' through interpreting and responding appropriately to each new challenge or situation.

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<sup>353</sup> HRN, 'Is God in the War?' op. cit., p. 953.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid., p. 954.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid.



Fourthly, despite Aldrich's unease with the notion, Niebuhr affirms the conception of 'vicarious suffering' as a fitting way to describe the 'crucifixion' of 'simple God-fearing peasants' and other people who suffer in war but who do so without any such conscious understanding that their suffering is vicarious. The thrust of Niebuhr's argument is that from the stance of radical monotheism, a faith posture in which the world is affirmed as being 'a meaningful process', the only adequate way to interpret people's excruciating experiences is that of vicarious suffering, for 'whether they do so willingly or unwillingly, the innocent suffer for our sins'. Understood aright, such contemporary crosses are the painful instruments by which God brings forth 'the fruits of repentance'.<sup>356</sup>

This is a rigorously austere interpretation, perhaps too hard for many people to stomach,<sup>357</sup> but Niebuhr presses his argument along the same sobering lines in the third and final 'war article' in *The Christian Century*. If war is not to be understood as 'the survival of the fittest' or as merely 'retributive justice', then we seem to be compelled to understand 'the nature of cosmic justice' as in some sense to be derived from 'the crucifixion of Jesus Christ'.<sup>358</sup>

As Niebuhr sees it, war is very much like crucifixion in that in 'both events there is a strange intermixture of justice and injustice on the side alike of those who regard themselves as the upholders of the right and on the side of the vanquished'.<sup>359</sup> For instance, of the three men who were crucified on Golgotha, two were probably insurrectionists in the traditional understanding of that term, one of whom acknowledged the partial justice of his punishment, and the third, Jesus, who, though not seeking the overthrow of the established order by the same means, nonetheless constituted a genuine threat to Roman order and Jewish law by his establishment of that mysterious rule called 'the kingdom of God'. 'Nor were the crucifiers less mixed in their justice and injustice' be they soldiers, priests, judge, citizens or mob. 'They knew not what they did. War is

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<sup>356</sup> Ibid., pp. 954-955.

<sup>357</sup> To this extent it bears quite strong resemblance to some of the First World War writings of P. T. Forsyth: see especially his *The Justification of God: Lectures for War-Time on a Christian Theodicy*, London, Duckworth, 1916.

<sup>358</sup> HRN, 'War as Crucifixion,' op. cit., pp. 513-514.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid., p. 514.

like that – apparently indiscriminate in its choice of victims and of victors, whether these be thought of as individuals or as communities.<sup>360</sup>

But a second striking resemblance between war and the crucifixion is that the latter becomes the paradigm by which we may learn to abandon our moral indifference or cynicism. The cross ‘requires men to take their moral decisions with greater rather than less seriousness; it demonstrates the sublime character of real goodness; it is a revelation, though “in a glass darkly,” of the intense moral earnestness of a God who will not abandon mankind to self-destruction; it confronts us with the tragic consequences of moral failure. It does all this because it is sacrifice – the self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ for those whom he loves and God’s sacrifice of his best-loved Son for the sake of the just and the unjust.’ God works in, through, and even over-against the mixed and complex actions of human beings so that an ‘almost infinite capacity for goodness is reflected in the dark glass of sinfulness.’<sup>361</sup>

Perhaps then, muses Niebuhr, the analogy between the cross and war is more than an analogy. The cross, it seems, reveals the reality of things, founded on God’s righteousness, which is different from, and superior to, the dubious and manifold manifestations of human righteousness. Invoking Paul’s characteristic hermeneutic in the New Testament, Niebuhr suggests: ‘The cross of Jesus Christ is the final, convincing demonstration of the fact that the order of the universe is not one of retribution in which goodness is rewarded and evil punished, but rather an order of graciousness’ which means that ‘the whole effort to assess and judge the goodness and the evil of self and others, and to reward or punish accordingly, is mistaken.’<sup>362</sup> We are now at the very heart of Niebuhr’s *theologia crucis*, and perhaps it is best to let him speak for himself in the following three paragraphs in which the cumulative force of his distinctive interpretation gathers to a head.

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<sup>360</sup> Ibid.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid., pp. 514-515.

God's righteousness is his graciousness and his grace is not an addition to his justice; hence man's rightness does not lie in a new order of judging justice, but in the acceptance of grace and in thankful response to it. The cross does not so much reveal that God judges by other standards than men do, but that he does not judge; it does not demonstrate that men judge by the wrong standards but that their wrongness lies in trying to judge each other, instead of beginning where they can begin – with the acceptance of graciousness and response to it.

If the cross is not only a historical event but a revelation of the order of reality, then war is not only like the cross but must be a demonstration of that same order of God. How it demonstrates the disorderliness of human righteousness and unrighteousness is apparent enough. How it demonstrates the fundamental ungraciousness of both the apparently righteous and the apparently unrighteous is perhaps also clear. But that it should be the hidden demonstration of divine graciousness is hard for us to understand. The cross in ancient history is acceptable to us; the cross in "religious" history, in the history of man's relation to a purely spiritual God, is also acceptable; but the cross in our present history is a stumbling block and a folly which illustrates human sinfulness, but not divine graciousness.

Yet how the divine grace appears in the crucifixion of war may become somewhat clear when the cross of Christ is used to interpret it. Then our attention is directed to the death of the guiltless, the gracious, and the suffering of the innocent becomes a call to repentance, to a total revolution of our minds and hearts. And such a call to repentance – not to sorrow but to spiritual revolution – is an act of grace, a great recall from the road to death which we all travel together, the just and the unjust, the victors and the vanquished. Interpreted through the cross of Jesus Christ the suffering of the innocent is seen not as the suffering of temporal men but of the eternal victim "slain from the foundations of the world." If the Son of Man is being crucified in this war along with the malefactors – and he is being crucified on many an obscure hill – then the graciousness of God, the self-giving love, is more manifest here than in all the years of peace.<sup>363</sup>

However, crucial though the suffering of the innocent and the associated principle of vicariousness are, these still only form part of the governance of God. Another important aspect of this is what Niebuhr calls "statesmanship":

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<sup>363</sup> Ibid., p. 515.

that is 'the ability to use the meanness of men for the common good'.<sup>364</sup> This is the overarching wisdom that can take the various, flawed, partial and often, differing intentions and actions of people, and despite all their potential or even real conflict, manage, somehow, to bring forth a more comprehensive good. This 'good' may be what none of those involved in any situation may have imagined or desired, but it is one for which the 'Master Statesman' has all along been working for with wise and tenacious intent.<sup>365</sup>

For Niebuhr, this is the most adequate way of understanding God's governing action. We do not know everything about God's ordering and providential activities but what we do discern is that the divine intent and action is not so much to be identified with, or isolated as, any particular thing or event, but rather, as the total or overarching context. Niebuhr calls upon the Scriptures to attest to his interpretation: Genesis 45 recounts how Joseph's life story works for a greater, though, humanly speaking, unforeseen good, a good that lies in God making use of the evil intent and actions of Joseph's brothers. Likewise, citing Isaiah 10, a favourite text of Niebuhr's, he shows how God uses the savage intent of Assyria to bring about a prophetic renewal within the inhabitants of Jerusalem.<sup>366</sup>

But of course the supreme paradigm is Jesus Christ who throughout his public ministry was the object of misunderstanding, misrepresentation, fear, suspicion, hostility, rejection and abuse, as well, it should be noted, of more positive responses too. Yet it is especially evident in the events leading up to his execution that the main participants or co-actors in this unfolding drama thought to do evil towards him – the priests, the mob, the soldiers, Judas, Caiaphas, Pilate; as well as, unwittingly, the disciples in their desertion of Jesus. 'God did not do good by Judas' betrayal, but yet he did not do it without it. God's action was not in any of the events leading to the crucifixion, but in

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<sup>364</sup> James Gustafson, class notes for HRN's *Christian Ethics Lectures*, 1952-53. p. 79, cited by Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, op. cit., p. 195.

<sup>365</sup> Yetter, class notes for HRN's *Christian Ethics Lectures*, 1952-53, p. 125 in which Abraham Lincoln is identified by Niebuhr as blending into a more constructive harmony, the contentious factions involved in the American Civil War.

<sup>366</sup> HRN, 'The Illusions of Power,' *The Pulpit* 33, 1962, pp. 4(100) – 7(103) in which he intriguingly suggests parallels with the Cold War hostilities between the U.S.A. and Russia. See also Yetter, *HRN Christian Ethics Lectures*, op.cit., p. 126.

the context and in the resurrection . . . Unless there was in some sense resurrection, we would not say of the crucifixion, God thought to do good.<sup>367</sup>

Woven deep into these reflections are various strands that Niebuhr sees as integral to a proper understanding of the appropriate human response to God's governing action. First and perhaps foremost, is the idea that the human being is a 'patient' upon whom God acts in and through all the factors that constitute the divinely ordained powers, or forces, or action-fields in which we find ourselves participating. A second idea that is associated with, and consequent upon this, is that human beings are thus limited by the various factors or co-actors that impinge upon them, whether these be primarily historical, physical, intellectual, economic or whatever. This can often be burdensome or frustrating but Niebuhr offers an alternative suggestion, namely that limitation 'may be the beginning of *metanoia*; it may force a man from his egocentricity. Self-denial takes place where one is being limited. If limitations be accepted the revolution of understanding of the self as instrument of God and not as center of existence may take place. God, not the self, is the proper center of all things.'<sup>368</sup> This idea of self-denial is one which we noted earlier, Niebuhr found especially evident in Calvin's *Institutes*, Book 3, Chapter 7, and is a major component of his understanding of 'the responsible self' in all its interlocking dimensions, but particularly with regard to response to the governing action of God.<sup>369</sup>

Niebuhr characteristically concluded his class lectures on Christian Ethics by discussing how self-denial should manifest itself in our restraint of others. The following brief outline of his main proposals is as follows: (1) We cannot choose whether or not we will restrain others since we all inescapably do so anyway as inter-related social selves and inter-acting responsible selves. We are both active and passive in our interpersonal interactions. The more pertinent question is, 'How should we exercise such restraint of others in response to the ongoing governance of God?' (2) Since we are being restrained by God's

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<sup>367</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid., pp. 127-128.

<sup>369</sup> The theme of 'self-denial' is especially important in today's context in which issues of globalisation and environmentalism are increasingly to the fore. The mutuality of these themes will be taken up in section 4 of chapter five of this thesis which looks at Niebuhr's work from an 'ecumenical' perspective.

impinging actions, we are thus called to restrain others in accordance with the principle of self-denial or self-discipline. (3) We restrain others ever mindful of the fact that we live with a mutual and two-fold responsibility to God for our neighbour and to our neighbour before God. And (4) self-denying restraint serves the ultimate ends of God's transforming intent. We hope, and work and pray that those, who at present, may need to be restrained, will yet be conserved and redeemed.<sup>370</sup>

## 6. 'Christo-morphic' Responsibility

The foregoing exposition and interpretation of Niebuhr's ethics of responsibility leaves us with some important questions still to address. One such question is about the place of Jesus Christ in the argument thus presented. The answer that we can now give is that Jesus Christ is crucial, definitive and indispensable to Niebuhr's ethics. For example, 'as Christians', states Niebuhr, this time presenting his case in confessional form, 'we become aware that in Christian life Jesus Christ is a symbolic form with the aid of which men tell each other what life and death, God and man, are *like*; but even more he is a form which they employ as an a priori, an image, a scheme or pattern in the mind which gives form and meaning to their experience.'<sup>371</sup>

Specifically, this means that 'Jesus Christ, his *Gestalt*, his drama, function as symbolic forms', thus enabling God, self and neighbour to be apprehended, understood and evaluated as 'Christo-morphic', that is, 'Christ-like'.<sup>372</sup> 'From the recognition of an infant's value and destiny with the aid of images of manger and cross of Christ, to the acceptance of death as dying with Christ, to the discovery of a quality of existence that like Christ's cannot be conquered by death, to the understanding of man's place and responsibility in the cosmos as a

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<sup>370</sup> Yetter, pp. 128-132.

<sup>371</sup> HRN, *The Responsible Self*, op. cit., p. 154.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid., pp. 154-159. The term 'Christo-morphic' appears on p. 155; see also Terrence Owen Sherry, *Shaped by Christ: The Christo-morphic Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, Lewiston, Edwin Meller Press, 2003.

son of God, the symbolism of the gospel story pervades the Christian consciousness in all evaluation, action and suffering.<sup>373</sup>

In a real sense, then, for Niebuhr, Jesus is the prototypical faithful self, who both incarnates and mediates radical monotheism to those other social selves who, in rebellious defiance or denial, manifest faithlessness in myriad ways. In being this and doing this, he is also the *responsible self*. As such, as the human embodiment of responsibility to God's creative, governing and redeeming action *in* and *for* the world, Jesus may be described in two distinct, though inter-related ways: 'Christ as Paradigm of Responsibility'<sup>374</sup> and also 'Christ as Redeemer to Responsible Being'.<sup>375</sup>

In his understanding of Jesus Christ as 'paradigm of responsibility', Niebuhr notes that 'he is the responsible man who in all his responses to alteractions did what fitted into the divine action. He interpreted every alteraction that he encountered as a sign of the action of God, of the universal, omnificent One, whom he called Father. He responded to all action upon him as one who anticipated the divine answer to his answers.'<sup>376</sup> Our exposition earlier in his chapter gave ample evidence of how Niebuhr sees in Jesus the paradigm or embodiment of faithful response to God's threefold action.

Secondly, however, Niebuhr also underscores the significance or status of Jesus Christ for Christians in that he 'is also the one who accomplishes in them this strange miracle, that he makes them suspicious of their deep suspicion of the Determiner of Destiny. He turns their reasoning around so that they do not begin with the premise of God's indifference but of his affirmation of the creature, so that the *Gestalt* which they bring to their experiences of suffering as well as of joy, of death as well as of life, is the *Gestalt*, the symbolic form, of grace.'<sup>377</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid., pp. 162-173.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid., pp. 174-178.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid., pp. 175-176.

In typical Niebuhrian fashion, there is a degree of modesty, with more than a trace of agnosticism, about just *how* this redemption from faithlessness, and thus, to trusting reconciliation occurs. Niebuhr volunteers the opinion that few people 'are satisfied with the theories of atonement current in the churches, dependent as these are on questionable images of the ultimate rightness of God, or of the sources of human estrangement.'<sup>378</sup> Niebuhr again states his preference here for the sort of 'pistological' or 'social existentialist' exposition that we analysed in the first two chapters, since he feels it is less remote from, and resonates more strongly with, the contemporary context of the Western world, especially as this manifests itself so often in a sort of spiritual emptiness and meaninglessness, whose void is filled with a plethora of dissipating polytheisms and destructive henotheisms. The *theologia crucis* that we have been expounding throughout this thesis thus finds further expression in the ethics of responsibility that Christ incarnates and mediates, in a way that is dependent on, and congruent with, the radical monotheism that he embodies himself and communicates to others. Niebuhr movingly renders this in the following 'crucial' paragraph where he makes it clear that it is God in Christ who takes responsibility for the redemption and transformation of the human plight:

However adequate or inadequate our theories of at-onement or reconciliation may be, the fact remains: the movement beyond resignation to reconciliation is the movement inaugurated and maintained in Christians by Jesus Christ. By Jesus Christ men have been and are empowered to become sons of God – not as those who are saved out of a perishing world but as those who know that the world is being saved. That its being saved from destruction involves the burning up of an infinite amount of tawdry works, that it involves the healing of a miasmatic ocean of disease, the resurrection of the dead, the forgiveness of sins, the making good of an infinite number of irresponsibilities, that such making good is not done except by suffering servants who often do not know the name of Christ though they bear his image – all this Christians know. Nevertheless, they move toward their end and all endings as those who, knowing defeats, do not believe in defeat.<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid., p. 177.



In light of the place of Christ in his own ethics, it is therefore interesting, and perhaps somewhat puzzling, to note Niebuhr's criticisms or unease with Barth's Christologically-determined, or better, Christocentrically-determined ethics. The main charge is that Niebuhr sees Barth's ethics, as well as those of Bultmann, as being examples of deontological ethics, with some of the attendant difficulties and limitations that he believes belongs to those various theories found under the same umbrella.<sup>380</sup> However, much of Niebuhr's critique loses its force, as Robert Willis has suggested, whenever Barth's position is 'properly identified as one embodying an 'act-deontology' in distinction from the 'rule-deontology' that Niebuhr seems to assume it to be.<sup>381</sup> If this is accepted, as I believe should be the case, then Barth's ethics are not nearly so foreign to the ethics of response that Niebuhr himself expounded. This is largely because 'Barth's identification of the Law as the form of the Gospel indicated neither inconsistency nor ambiguity, for the simple reason that Barth invests the whole notion of Law with a meaning drawn exclusively from the context of grace. The additional fact that devolves from this, that the Law, in presenting itself as command, is given the operational aspect of permission, seems merely to underline again the importance of keeping to a dynamic rather than a static view of Law. In the end, this focuses persistently on the necessity (and inevitability) of man's response.'<sup>382</sup>

This point is of far reaching significance for my thesis. Throughout its course, we have been carrying out, as a kind of background theme, an implicit comparison or quiet conversation between Niebuhr and Barth. Niebuhr, as stated before, often felt constrained to try and develop his theology and ethics in

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<sup>380</sup> Ibid., pp. 66, 131. At this stage we need not rehearse or repeat Niebuhr's critique of deontological ethics that we provided in section 1 of this current chapter, suffice it to say that, for Niebuhr, deontological notions tend to be much too static, hegemonic and conservatively formal.

<sup>381</sup> Robert E. Willis, 'The Concept of Responsibility in the Ethics of Karl Barth and H. Richard Niebuhr,' *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 23, 1963, pp. 279-290, p. 279. For more on the distinction between act- and rule-deontological theories see William K. Frankena, *Ethics*, in the Foundations of Philosophy Series, Elizabeth and Monroe Beardsley, eds. Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1963, pp. 15f, 21-25.

<sup>382</sup> Willis, op. cit., p. 290. Space does not permit more than a brief reference to the possibilities for constructive correspondence or congruence between Niebuhr's and Bonhoeffer's ethics on the use of the concept of 'responsibility', esp. as this is found in the latter's *Ethics and Letters and Papers from Prison*. For more on this see, for example, Larry Rasmussen, 'The Ethics of Responsible Action,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 206-225.

conscious distinction from Barth's position. Whilst agreeing that there are real points of divergence or shifts of emphasis between them, part of my argument is that both have more in common than Niebuhr seemed prepared to admit. For example, in the case of their ethics, as suggested above, Niebuhr's 'meta-ethics' of appropriate human response to the three-fold structure of God's creative, governing and redemptive action is remarkably congruent with, or at least similar to, Barth's notion of obeying the law of God's grace in Jesus Christ, especially as this has been helpfully rendered, by John Webster, in terms of acting within the 'moral space' of the gospel.<sup>383</sup> Indeed, both Niebuhr and Barth might be more helpfully described as supplying important reflections on the Christian 'ethos' and the broad principles of 'meta-ethics', rather than the more 'cut-and-dried' casuistic resolution of specific moral dilemmas that people often expect or demand from ethicists.<sup>384</sup>

Furthermore, yet crucially, despite some methodological differences in their respective theological ethics, both Niebuhr and Barth displayed an uncanny similarity of outlook when it came to their published perspectives on nearly all the major issues that demanded a Christian intellectual response in the years of their mature careers, roughly the middle third of the twentieth century. Their views on such issues as the Church's relation to society; the properly Christian response to the exigencies of the Second World War; the West's paranoia in the midst of the power struggle of the 'Cold War', and many other questions of moral urgency in contemporary society were remarkably similar, and remain as resources of wisdom upon which current and subsequent generations may have much yet to learn.<sup>385</sup>

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<sup>383</sup> John Webster, 'The Room of the Gospel: Barth's Moral Ontology,' in *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 214-230. Webster acknowledges that an important source for his own interpretation of Barth here is Charles Taylor, esp., C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, pp. 8ff.

<sup>384</sup> For an assessment of Niebuhr along these lines see, for example, Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, op. cit., pp. 266-269; Jerry H. Gill, 'Christian Meta-Ethics,' *Encounter* 29, 1986, pp. 183-206.

<sup>385</sup> HRN, 'Reformation: Continuing Imperative,' op. cit., pp. 248-251; for Niebuhr's similarity to the well known views of Barth on the Cold War see, for example, HRN, 'The Illusions of Power,' *The Pulpit* 33, 1962, pp. 4 (100) - 7 (103). For an important source of some of Barth's ethical and political writings see, for example, Karl Barth, *Against the Stream*, ed. Ronald Gregor Smith, trans. E. M. Delacour and Stanley Godman, London, SCM, 1954. See also David Edward Roberts, 'Hopeful Realism: A Theological Ethic of Contemporary Conflict, Reflecting

## 7. Conclusion

We are now in a position to conclude this analysis of Niebuhr's work from an *ethical* perspective by making a few, succinct observations. We have seen that his ethics of responsibility are consistent with the theological underpinning of radical monotheism that we considered earlier. In conceptual terms, his anthropology of the human being in the theology of chapters one and two, designated as the *social self* or, more specifically, the *faithless/faithful self*, here finds its ethical counterpart in the descriptive label the *responsible self*. The human being is most adequately thought of as an interpreting, interacting agent, who, rather than simply seeking to do what is 'right' in deontological terms, or 'good' in teleological terms, seeks to do what is 'apt' or 'fitting' in the 'force-field' of factors that constitute any given context.

In the Christian ethics that were Niebuhr's chief educational stimulus and requirement in his vocation as seminary lecturer, he developed this theory in terms of our response to the creative, governing and redeeming action of God. Various criticisms have been levelled at Niebuhr's ethics: that they construe God's action in overly-deterministic fashion, thus rendering his notion of the human being as being too passive, resigned, or even paralysed.<sup>386</sup> For some this is related to the way in which he places too much emphasis on God's governing or ordering action in creation, in proportion to his redemptive actions.<sup>387</sup> For others the criticism is made that his ethics remain too much at the level of broad principles which are thus insufficiently detailed in casuistic direction;<sup>388</sup> and that this could be partly overcome by a greater attendance to the question of power in social, especially systemic settings.<sup>389</sup>

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Critically on the Writings of Karl Barth and H. Richard Niebuhr Concerning the Second World War,' Ph.D. dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2001.

<sup>386</sup> Hoedemaker, *op. cit.*, pp. 159-160; Fowler, *op. cit.*, pp. 261-269; Kliever, *op. cit.*, pp. 150, 172.

<sup>387</sup> John D. Barbour, 'Niebuhr versus Niebuhr: The Tragic Nature of History,' *The Christian Century*, 101, 1984, pp. 1096-1099, esp. p. 1099.

<sup>388</sup> Fowler, pp. 266-268; Clinton E. Gardner, 'Responsibility and Moral Direction in the Ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr,' *Encounter* 40, 1979, pp. 143-168.

<sup>389</sup> Beverly Wildung Harrison, 'H. Richard Niebuhr: Towards a Christian Moral Philosophy,' unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, 1974, pp. 301, 304, 312.

These criticisms are partially sustainable in that they do identify certain areas where Niebuhr's ethics could have been refined or some emphases somewhat revised. If a possible point of correction, or at least, supplementation, could be applied to his ethics, it might well relate to a point made back in section 5 of chapter 2, where it may be recalled that Niebuhr had only a scant pneumatology. In ontological terms, he remained unconvinced about the identity or ontology of the Holy Spirit as a distinct divine person, co-equal with the Father and the Son. Therefore, he was unable or unwilling to undertake an exposition of the Christian life in terms of responsibility as inspired and sustained by the Holy Spirit. It is in just this area, however, I would suggest, that some of the more passive or resigned tendencies in Niebuhr's construal of the responsible self might have been assuaged. A more robust pneumatology, thus integrated into a fully Trinitarian theology, would have rendered a still more satisfactory ethics than he managed to achieve, stimulating as his legacy in this latter area is.<sup>390</sup>

Despite some weight to their arguments, none of the above critiques, I believe, manage to seriously undermine or overthrow Niebuhr's project. His ethics would appear to have an enduring place in the work of contemporary, and surely, future practitioners, as is evident in the continuing work that others have been inspired or challenged to engage in. In response to his legacy of faithful and 'responsible' labour, there is still much for Christian ethicists and moral theologians to grapple with, as they too contemplate the imperatives inherent in a *theologia crucis*.<sup>391</sup> Perhaps above all else, Niebuhr's ethics, rather

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<sup>390</sup> For noteworthy examples of the kind of theological basis for a properly Christian ethics akin to Niebuhr's project, see Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God*, London, SCM Press, 1988, esp. pp. 254-285; Rowan Williams, 'Word and Spirit,' in *On Christian Theology*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 2000, pp. 107-127; George Hunsinger, 'The Mediator of Communion: Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Holy Spirit,' in *Disruptive Grace*, op. cit., pp. 148-185. At a more popular level see John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission*, London, SCM Press, 1987; *A Matter of Life and Death*, London, SCM Press, 1987, both of which connect to, and resonate with, many features in Niebuhr's ethics.

<sup>391</sup> See, for example, R. Melvin Keiser, *Roots of Relational Ethics: Responsibility in Origin and Maturity in H. Richard Niebuhr*, Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1996; Charles Scriven, *The Transformation of Culture: Christian Social Ethics After H. Richard Niebuhr*, Scottsdale, Pa., Herald Press, 1988; Glenn H. Stassen, ed., *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1996; William Werpehowski, *American Protestant*

like Barth's in this regard, draw our attention to the distinct lines of what it means to have our lives shaped by God's revelation to Israel, culminating in the coming of Jesus, and the entire 'Christ-event', but especially his crucifixion and resurrection. The community of those called to follow Jesus Christ thus find themselves entering into a new way of life, an *ethos of discipleship* that involves an ongoing, discerning, and above all, faithful response to the indicatives of God's three-fold action in and through Christ.

## Chapter Four: An Ecclesiological Perspective

### 1. Towards a Definition of the Church: A Polar Analysis

The argument of this thesis is that *radical monotheism* and *responsibility* are the most distinctive principles in Niebuhr's theology and ethics both of which centre on the conviction of the sovereignty of God. Once he had articulated these as his leitmotifs, he never strayed from his conviction that Christian faith could best be understood in terms of such radical faith in, and response to, the living God revealed in Jesus Christ. In this chapter we shall now consider these core convictions from an *ecclesiological* perspective since it was largely in this context, as a member of the Church, that Niebuhr sought to demonstrate his understanding of the *theologia crucis*, also designated as 'crucial faith'.

In some autobiographical reflections near the end of his career, Niebuhr wrote that his 'primary concern . . . [was] still that of the reformation of the church'.<sup>392</sup> Whilst other theologians, such as his brother Reinhold, felt themselves called more to the task of attempting to directly reform culture, H. Richard Niebuhr's vocation seemed to be more clearly to reform the wider society primarily by means of a continuous and thorough reformation of the Church.<sup>393</sup> Only as the Church gained greater clarity about its own mission, could it hope to demonstrate the required fidelity to its Lord, and thus provide a more authentic and effective witness to the wider world. Niebuhr believed that his particular role in this was to provide the kind of theological insights which would enable such Church reformation to occur.

A unique opportunity for Niebuhr to contribute to this reformation process came in the mid 1950's when he was asked to act as director of a research programme on theological education under the auspices of the American Association of Theological Schools. From 1954 to 1956 Niebuhr set aside all other scholarly commitments so that he could give his undivided attention to

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<sup>392</sup> HRN, 'Reformation: Continuing Imperative,' *The Christian Century* 77, 1960, p. 250.

<sup>393</sup> *Ibid.*

this important project, a research study which involved visits to, and feed back from, over ninety Protestant seminaries in the United States and Canada. The major published fruit of these labours was Niebuhr's 1956 book entitled *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*. In it, his long maturing reflections on ecclesiology, and in particular, ecclesiastical education were articulated. In the foreward he writes:

The general reason for the inquiry is to be found, of course, in the conviction that "the unexamined life is not worth living" – a principle that has been given a special form in the Christian demand for daily and lifelong repentance. Institutions and communities no less than individuals are subject to this requirement. It is said that an uninspected army deteriorates and this is doubtless true of all human organizations. We tend to repeat customary actions unaware that when we do today what we did yesterday we actually do something different since in the interval both we and our environment have changed; unaware also that we now do without conscious definition of purpose and method what was done yesterday with specific ends in view and by relatively precise means. Education in general, and not least ecclesiastical education, is subject to this constant process of deterioration and hence in need of periodic self-examination.<sup>394</sup>

A major part of what follows in Niebuhr's book is just such a constructive critique, in what was, in effect, an attempt to identify some of the ways in which the Church misconstrues its calling. As he saw it, '[m]uch confusion and uncertainty . . . seems to be due to lack of clarity about the community – the Church; about its form and matter, its relations and composition.'<sup>395</sup> The method by which Niebuhr seeks to define the nature of the Church is what he calls "polar analysis". By this he means the effort to 'try to do justice to the dynamic character of that social reality, the Church, by defining certain poles between which it moves or which it represents.'<sup>396</sup> Niebuhr names six polar

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<sup>394</sup> HRN, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry: Reflections on the Aims of Theological Education*, in collaboration with D.D. Williams and J.M. Gustafson, New York, Harper and Bros., 1956, p. viii.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19. Indeed the method of 'polar analysis' that Niebuhr specifically labels and employs in this book, is one that, in more general terms, he often employs elsewhere. For example, one could say that his entire theological programme follows a particular line deliberately pursued between the 'poles' of 'objectivism' (Barth) and 'subjectivism' (Schleiermacher and Troeltsch) without attempting to make an ultimate choice. For helpful

pairs in his analysis and we shall briefly look at each of these in turn, since they offer us an important insight into his entire ecclesiology.

In the first polar pair, Niebuhr asserts that the Church is 'the subjective pole of the objective rule of God.'<sup>397</sup> Developing this initial statement a bit more he writes: 'Several things are implied in this understanding of the Church: negatively, the Church is not the rule or realm of God; positively, there is no apprehension of the kingdom except in the Church; conversely, where there is apprehension of, and participation in, this Object there the Church exists; and, finally, the subject-counterpart of the kingdom is never an individual in isolation but one in community, that is, in the Church.'<sup>398</sup>

Elsewhere, though in similar vein, Niebuhr is at great pains to distinguish his own understanding of the Church from various, as he sees it, overly subjectivist interpretations. Speaking of the reality encountered in the decisive events that constitute the Church he says that 'it is the gift to see and to hear, not first of all those who look with us and hear with us, but to see and hear what is beyond them and us together. It is the vision directed toward the revelation of God in Christ, toward the Christ who is not first of all the spirit in the church but the Lord it encounters, toward the Word carved on tables of stone and nailed on a cross, not echoed within, toward the atonement that is independent of our view of it, toward the kingdom and the law that rule and judge us from a throne that is lifted high above us.'<sup>399</sup>

Niebuhr calls this the Church's 'Catholic vision' which, for him, means that it 'is not mystic for it is directed toward the objective and the independent rather than toward the subjective and internal.'<sup>400</sup> Speaking in the mid 1950's of theological trends, he reckons that the 'theology of our predecessors and our

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insights into the logic of this 'polar analysis' though rendered in somewhat different terminology, see the section entitled 'The *Koinonia* Relation: An Exercise in Theological Anatomy,' pp. 256-261, in George Hunsinger, 'Baptized into Christ's Death: Karl Barth and the Future of Roman Catholic Theology,' in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, op. cit., pp. 253-278.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid.

<sup>399</sup> HRN, 'The Gift of the Catholic Vision,' *Theology Today*, 4, 1948, p. 514.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid.



theology can both be characterized by reference to the double prepositions that each employs. The favorite preposition of liberal theology is *within*, of the post-liberal *over against*. It was the gift of the earlier movement to understand that “the kingdom of God is within you”; of the contemporary one to see that it is over against us. So with the word of God, which for the one “is nigh thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart” and for the other “is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit.” The gift of the Catholic vision is the gift of objective view.<sup>401</sup>

The second pair of polar terms that Niebuhr uses in his analysis is to describe the Church as both ‘community’ and ‘institution’.<sup>402</sup> Each of these terms says something important, indeed crucial, about the nature of the Church, yet neither without the other is adequate, and various distortions are evident when one pole predominates. In broad brushstrokes Niebuhr suggests that ‘no community can exist without some institutions that give it form, boundaries, discipline, and the possibilities of expression and common action. On the other hand, no institution can long exist without some common mind and drive that expresses and defines itself in institutions.’<sup>403</sup>

In the third pair of terms, Niebuhr sees the Church as existing between the polar realities of being ‘one’ and yet also ‘many’ as in the well known New Testament image of being like a human body which has many members. ‘It is a pluralism moving towards unity and a unity diversifying and specifying itself.’<sup>404</sup> It is in such a dialectical ‘unity-in-diversity’ that the Church exists as the Body of which Jesus Christ is the Living Head.

The fourth polarity that Niebuhr identifies, and one that is similar, in some ways to the previous one, is that the Church is both ‘local’ and ‘universal’.<sup>405</sup> Even in its most modest forms, ‘the localized Church implies the universal, but the universal no less implies the local; without localization, without becoming

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<sup>401</sup> Ibid., pp. 514-515.

<sup>402</sup> HRN, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, op. cit., p. 21. Section 1 of chapter five in this thesis will address this particular issue in more detail.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

concrete in a specific occasion, it does not exist'.<sup>406</sup> A parochial concern with the often all too predictable patterns of local parish life is just as unhealthy as a bland ecumenism that fails to ground itself in the concrete realities of specific settings and particular people.

In a fifth polarity, Niebuhr states that the Church is 'catholic and protestant' where these terms do not stand so much for the names of distinct historical institutions, but especially, in this instance, for differing principles within ecclesial life. For Niebuhr 'the principle of protest against every tendency to confuse the symbol with what it symbolizes and the subject with the object, is a constituent element in the being of the community, even apart from the institutional organizations.'<sup>407</sup> However this iconoclasm can only really exist whenever and wherever it is able to presuppose the incarnation of some reality. 'Unless the Infinite is represented in finite form, unless the Word becomes flesh over and over again, though only as oral preaching, unless the risen Christ manifests himself in the visible forms of individual saintliness and communal authority there is no human relation to the Infinite and Transcendent.'<sup>408</sup>

The sixth and final polarity which Niebuhr proposes is that of 'Church and world.' This is similar to the first polar pair of 'subject and object' in that it is not so much a polarity within the Church as it is a polarity in which it participates as itself a kind of pole. 'The Church lives and defines itself in action vis-à-vis the world. World, however, is not object of Church as God is. World, rather, is companion of the Church, a community something like itself with which it lives before God. The world is sometimes enemy, sometimes partner of Church, often antagonist, always one to be befriended; now it is the co-knower, now the one that does not know what Church knows, now the knower of what Church does not know.'<sup>409</sup>

Niebuhr's understanding of the nature or being of the Church is thus subtle and nuanced. His method of polar analysis attempts to demonstrate something

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<sup>406</sup> Ibid.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

of this rich complexity. Simplistic and one-sided notions are just not adequate in describing the essence of what the community of Jesus Christ is called to be. The continuous interplay of these various factors is part of the dynamic reality that is inherent in the life of the Church when it is being true to the laws of its own nature. Some words of John V. Taylor, though used in a different setting, seem particularly apt as a description of Niebuhr's richly nuanced ecclesiology: – 'The blessedness of this inter-related, God-related community might be thought of either as wholeness or as harmony. The wholeness was the all-inclusiveness of the framework of reference; the harmony was the reciprocity of all the parts . . . the ever-shifting equipoise of a life-system.'<sup>410</sup> Whenever these intricate interactions are neglected, ignored, suppressed or otherwise distorted, the result is always the faithless falling away of the Church's witness into disaster and evil. Some of these distortions or 'deformations' will be examined in greater detail in section 3 of this chapter.

## **2. The Purpose of the Church: The Increase of the Love of God and Neighbour**

Niebuhr's polar analysis of the nature of the Church has given us ample evidence of the variety of purpose, multiplicity of goals and sheer differentiated vitality within this community. And yet, as he puts it, '[t]he question is whether there is one end beyond the many objectives as there is one Church in the many churches. Is there one goal to which all other goals are subordinate, not necessarily as means to end, but as proximate objectives that should be sought only in relation to a final purpose?'<sup>411</sup> A little later in his reflections, Niebuhr calls this 'the final unifying consideration that modifies all the special strivings.'<sup>412</sup>

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<sup>410</sup> John V. Taylor, *Enough is Enough*, London, SCM Press, 1975, p. 42.

<sup>411</sup> HRN, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, op. cit., p. 28.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

Niebuhr has been careful to indicate the rich multiplicity that seems to belong inescapably to the life of the Church. His intensive interaction with the work of Ernst Troeltsch, on whom he had done his doctoral dissertation, had doubtless given him a profound appreciation for the diversity of ecclesial expressions. But lest this diversity became too centrifugal, Niebuhr now offers his own attempt at unifying the Church around a central or common purpose. This definition of the goal of the Church he states as 'the increase among men of the love of God and neighbor.'<sup>413</sup> He immediately notes that these simple words of Jesus are interpreted in various ways by different elements within the Church, and therefore, that certain shifts of emphasis are inevitable within the Christian community as a whole. His conviction, nonetheless, is that if this increase of the love of God and neighbour 'is the ultimate objective may it not be that many of our confusions and conflicts in churches and seminaries are due to failure to keep this goal in view while we are busy in the pursuit of proximate ends that are indeed important, but which set us at cross-purposes when followed without adequate reference to the final good?'<sup>414</sup>

According to normative Christian terminology, Jesus' summary statement 'is both "law" and "gospel"; it is both the requirement laid on man by the Determiner of all things and the gift given, albeit in incompleteness, by the self-giving of the Beloved.'<sup>415</sup> But whilst there is a distinction between the two loves, there is no division or separation. Niebuhr tells us why. 'The interrelations of self, companion and God are so intricate that no member of this triad exists in his true nature without the others, nor can he be known or loved without the others.'<sup>416</sup> Spelt out in slightly more explicit detail this means that 'God's love of self and neighbor, neighbor's love of God and self, self's love of God and neighbor are so closely interrelated that none of the relations exists without the others.'<sup>417</sup>

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<sup>413</sup> Ibid., p. 31 Note Niebuhr's American spelling of "neighbor".

<sup>414</sup> Ibid., pp. 31-32.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid.

Many people might assume that they already know what the words *love*, *God* and *neighbour* mean. Often, however, the definitions offered for these three terms can be so distorted and reductionist in theory, as to be disastrous and destructive in practice. Alert to such potential problems, Niebuhr now provides us with some illuminating and evocative ideas of what he believes each of these key terms indicate or mean.

For Niebuhr, *love* means at least four things: rejoicing, gratitude, reverence and loyalty. His elucidation of these four features is full of such rich, descriptive depth that it is well worth quoting in its entirety. He writes:

Love is rejoicing over the existence of the beloved one; it is the desire that he be rather than not be; it is longing for his presence when he is absent; it is happiness in the thought of him; it is profound satisfaction over everything that makes him great and glorious. Love is gratitude: it is thankfulness for the existence of the beloved; it is the happy acceptance of everything that he gives without the jealous feeling that the self ought to be able to do as much; it is gratitude that does not seek equality; it is wonder over the other's gift of himself in companionship. Love is reverence: it keeps its distance even as it draws near; it does not seek to absorb the other in the self or want to be absorbed by it; it rejoices in the otherness of the other; it desires the beloved to be what he is and does not seek to fashion him into a replica of the self or to make him a means to the self's advancement. As reverence love is and seeks knowledge of the other, not by way of curiosity nor for the sake of gaining power but in rejoicing and in wonder. In all such love there is an element of that "holy fear" which is not a form of flight but rather deep respect for the otherness of the beloved and the profound unwillingness to violate his integrity. Love is loyalty; it is the willingness to let the self be destroyed rather than that the other cease to be; it is the commitment of the self by self-binding will to make the other great. It is loyalty, too, to the other's cause – to his loyalty.<sup>418</sup>

It is clear that Niebuhr's acute analysis of the meaning and reality of love is deeply informed by what the New Testament means by love or *agape*, especially as depicted in Paul's magnificent meditation in 1 Corinthians 13. It might not be saying too much to suggest that Niebuhr's description suffers little

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<sup>418</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

by comparison in terms of insight and lyricism. One notices too, that much of his analysis of the phenomenology of love is closely related to his 'pistology' or phenomenology of faith that we carefully considered in the first two chapters.<sup>419</sup>

But what of the word *God* when we speak of the divine reality in relation to such love? Here Niebuhr uses a flurry of descriptive labels, for instance, making reference to 'the Source and Center of all being, the Determiner of destiny, the Universal One - God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth.'<sup>420</sup> According to Niebuhr, God is no obvious reality, no 'lovely being easily made the object of our affection'. To love any such thing in this or similar ways is to fall into the essence of all sin: idolatry, which, as we saw earlier in this thesis, is the directing of our love and worship to any object other than God himself.<sup>421</sup> There is a holiness, transcendence and sheer otherness which belongs inescapably to the divine nature. To speak of reconciliation and love to God is both a reality and perennial possibility, but Niebuhr seems keen here to emphasize the hidden and sometimes, even harrowing aspects of what it involves to truly love God. The heavily existentialist strain, seldom far from Niebuhr's writings, comes to the fore in the following passage, steeped in the spirit of his distinctive *theologia crucis*. He writes:

Reconciliation to God is reconciliation to life itself; love to the Creator is love of being, rejoicing in existence, in its source, totality and particularity. Love to God is more than that, however, great as this demand and promise are. It is loyalty to the idea of God when the actuality of God is mystery ; it is the affirmation of a universe and the devoted will to maintain a universal community at whatever cost to the self. It is the patriotism of the universal commonwealth, the kingdom of God, as a commonwealth of justice and love, the reality of which is sure to become evident. There is in such love of God a will-to-believe as the will-to-be-loyal to everything God and his kingdom stand for. Love to God is conviction that there is faithfulness at the heart of things:

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<sup>419</sup> A further analysis of the inter-relationship of *faith*, *love* and *hope* in Niebuhr's work will be carried out in section 3 of the sixth chapter of this thesis which deals more with matters of eschatology.

<sup>420</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>421</sup> See section 5 of chapter one of this thesis.

unity, reason, form and meaning in the plurality of being. It is the accompanying will to maintain or assert that unity, form and reason despite all appearances.<sup>422</sup>

So far we have considered Niebuhr's meditations on what he means by two of the three terms in the triad – *love*, *God* and *neighbour*. We have looked at his richly descriptive definitions of *love* and *God* as he has presented them to us in his distinctive style of phenomenological existentialism. I have suggested that there is a kind of *theologia crucis* in these reflections, especially when he ponders who or what is meant by the word *God*. However, the interesting, or even surprising thing about these reflections, is that so far Niebuhr, as a Christian theologian, has made no explicit reference to Jesus Christ. One way of assessing this could be to conclude that Niebuhr is proceeding along a line of argument which, in its relative abstraction from Christological realities, can only lead to misleading and reductionist definitions of what is meant by the terms *love* and *God*. At this stage one might be prepared to give some room to the suspicions of certain kinds of doctrinal orthodoxy, which seek to understand every aspect of the life, mission and witness of the Church from the confessional standpoint of faith in Jesus Christ. In these approaches, *love* and *God* are defined with intensive, or even exclusive reference to Jesus Christ; he is the one who embodies what both of these realities are, and who thus authorises us to describe them in terms of what he is and does. Niebuhr, however, has chosen to follow a different course here. He has so far withheld making any explicit reference to Jesus Christ, though much of the content and style of his reflections on *love* and *God* have been, I am suggesting, suffused with christological imagery, especially in terms of a kind of *theologia crucis*.

But as we now turn to consider Niebuhr's treatment of *neighbour*, the third term of the triad which he has used to define the purpose of the Church, we find that the christological note becomes more explicit, and that Jesus Christ is specifically cited for the first time. In rhetorical fashion, Niebuhr asks: 'Who [then] . . . is my *neighbor*, the companion whom I am commanded to love as myself or as I have been loved by my most loyal neighbor, the companion

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<sup>422</sup> HRN, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, op. cit., pp. 36-37.

whose love is also promised me as mine is promised him?'<sup>423</sup> The paragraph which has been opened by the above quote is long, rich, complex and nuanced; but what becomes clear from Niebuhr's cumulative argument, is that the earlier rather cryptic reference to 'my most loyal neighbor' in fact applies to Jesus Christ. As Niebuhr continues in the same paragraph:

[My neighbor] is the near one and the far one; the one beside the road I travel here and now; the one removed from me by distances in time and space, in convictions and loyalties. He is my friend, the one who has shown compassion toward me; and my enemy, who fights against me. He is the one in need, in whose hunger, nakedness, imprisonment and illness I see or ought to see the universal suffering servant. He is the oppressed one who has not risen in rebellion against my oppression nor rewarded me according to my deserts as individual or member of a heedlessly exploiting group. He is the compassionate one who ministers to my needs: the stranger who takes me in; the father and mother, sister and brother. In him the image of the universal redeemer is seen as in a glass darkly. Christ is my neighbor, but the Christ in my neighbor is not Jesus; it is rather the eternal son of God incarnate in Jesus, revealed in Jesus Christ. The neighbor is in past and present and future, yet he is not simply mankind in its totality but rather in its articulation, the community of individuals and individuals in community. He is Augustine in the Roman Catholic Church and Socrates in Athens, and the Russian people, and the unborn generations who will bear the consequences of our failures, future persons for whom we are administering the entrusted wealth of nature and other greater common gifts. He is man and he is angel and he is animal and inorganic being, all that participates in being."<sup>424</sup>

In a later chapter we shall consider Niebuhr's theology from an *ecumenical* perspective, a feature which we found to be constitutive of *radical monotheism* per se, as expounded and analysed in the earlier chapters where we traced its content and contours from an existential, evangelical and also, by means of the concept of *responsibility*, an ethical perspective. What Niebuhr's meditations on the identity of the *neighbour* have done here, is once again to underline how absolutely essential this ecumenical, universal or catholic perspective is to a proper understanding of God's self-revelation in the reconciling and redeeming work of Jesus Christ. The Church is thus that community which centres on

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<sup>423</sup> Ibid., pp. 37-38.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid., p. 38.



Jesus Christ as the historical being through whom this work is accomplished and revealed. Niebuhr, as we saw in chapter two, is too careful a theologian to overlook the fact that Jesus Christ does so by being both divine and human. But the way in which Niebuhr would have us understand Jesus Christ, is not so much initially or primarily through his identity and agency as divine, but rather, as the archetypal or *Christo-morphic* neighbour to whom we are inescapably related. In ongoing interaction with this 'most loyal neighbor' we come to realise those fundamental truths about ourselves, about the world, and about God, that otherwise would continue to escape us or be ruinously misunderstood.

Why, we might ask, does Niebuhr develop his argument in this way, exploring Jesus Christ more from the viewpoint of his humanity, rather than the more classically 'Nicean' or 'Chalcedonian' approaches, in which Christ's divinity is presupposed or at least given greater emphasis? The reason is, I think, more for strategic or pragmatic reasons than for any particular desire on Niebuhr's part to deny or defy doctrinal orthodoxy.

In much of his work, Niebuhr is keen to find ways in which to connect Jesus Christ and his community with other communities, indeed with the world at large. His reading of church history leads him to believe that more harm than good has resulted from Christian exclusiveness. In other words, when the Church emphasises or over-emphasises the element of separatism from the surrounding society, it is often supposed, though not logically necessary, of course, that it is claiming for itself, a kind of righteousness which, properly speaking, is Christ's alone. Such self-righteousness, however, religiously or otherwise based, was one of the things to which Jesus himself was perhaps most opposed, for it tended to blind its adherents to the disastrous consequences which almost inevitably follow. As so often with Niebuhr, the intricate interaction between theology, ethics and history leads him to explore new ways in which to understand, articulate, and hopefully, reform or resolve, old dilemmas or perennial problems. In the next section of this chapter, we shall develop this point a bit further through the use of the terms *deformation* and

*henotheism* where the *theologia crucis* emerges as a painful, but profoundly necessary instrument of ecclesial self-critique.<sup>425</sup>

### **3. The Deformation of the Church: Confusing Proximate with Ultimate Goals**

Niebuhr has defined the goal of the Church as ‘the increase of the love of God and neighbor’. But given the multifarious nature of this community, it is hardly surprising that Jesus’ words are interpreted and applied in various ways. As far back as his first book *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, Niebuhr had shown profound appreciation for the plurality attendant with being the Church. However, whilst the manifold nature of the Church is a necessary part of its witness within a diverse world, there are also less welcome aspects to this diversity.

Jesus’ call for the love of God and neighbour ought to provide a grand unity of purpose for a plural Christian community, but instead, various parts of the Church ‘usually speak of more proximate contexts and goals and often manifest an almost ultimate concern in less ultimate matters. From such confusions of the proximate with the ultimate arise some of their external and internal conflicts.’<sup>426</sup> Not surprisingly, therefore, the Church finds that ‘its difficulties are increased tremendously by the internal conflict in which it is engaged when it substitutes the relative for the absolute.’<sup>427</sup>

What are some of these proximate contexts and goals? Speaking from his North American vantage point in the mid 1950’s, Niebuhr identifies four main ones out of a whole host of possibilities: denominationalism; ecclesiasticism;

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<sup>425</sup> For more on the term *henotheism*, see section 4 of chapter one and section 3 of chapter two.

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

Biblicism and 'Christism' this latter being a Niebuhrian term for an isolated and therefore distorted understanding of Jesus Christ.<sup>428</sup>

Taking each of these fallacies in turn, we note that the first one to elicit Niebuhr's criticism is denominationalism, which, in his first book he described as representing 'the moral failure of Christianity.'<sup>429</sup> To be sure, the one Church of Jesus Christ has always diversified itself in many ways so as relate meaningfully to its particular context. But disaster ensues whenever one finds 'the confusion of a branch of the Church with the whole Church' such that the denomination is practically considered to be the 'ultimate environment' in which life is lived and witness is borne.<sup>430</sup> A healthier understanding is one in which the Church avoids falling prey either to a petty provincialism or a bland unity. 'The confusion between part and whole is not to be avoided by denying the reality of the parts but only by the acceptance of diversity and limitation and the corollary recognition that all the parts are equally related to the ultimate object of the Church.'<sup>431</sup> Here we have clear evidence of Niebuhr's long-established ecumenical sensibility, an aspect of his life and work which we shall consider more fully when we look at radical monotheism and responsibility from this perspective in the next chapter.

The second, and perhaps more significant fallacy which Niebuhr identifies 'is the confusion of Church, considered as a whole or in its essence, with the ultimate context' in which the Church is called to be and to witness.<sup>432</sup> A common tendency is to think of "Church" or "Christianity" as filling the whole horizon of one's concern. But there is 'an internal contradiction' in regarding work for these 'as the final activity to be considered'. The contradiction is that here one is involved in a subtle form of subjectivism, where God is no longer acknowledged as objective and transcendent, and where Church or Christianity are all but equated with the sovereign activity that alone rests with him. To

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<sup>428</sup> Ibid., pp. 39-47, esp. p. 46 for the summary terms used here.

<sup>429</sup> HRN, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>430</sup> HRN, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, op. cit., p. 40.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid., pp. 40-41.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

remember Niebuhr's earlier polar analysis, the Church forgets that it is 'the subjective pole of the objective rule of God.'<sup>433</sup>

In other words, for Niebuhr, a good ecclesiology will strive to affirm and clarify the role which God has given to the Church, but in the process of doing so will also seek to put the life and work of this community in its proper place. The Church's place will thus always be strictly subordinate to God's purposes; and its role will be that of servant to Jesus Christ, its Lord and Head. In saying this, Niebuhr is reiterating some of the keenest insights of the Reformation, in the process making it quite clear that he still regards the Roman Catholic claim to ecclesial priority or even hegemony, as a claim from which he has to dissent. His views are well expressed when he writes elsewhere:

As Protestant Catholics we protest both against the absolutizing or deifying of the whole Catholic Church of which we are a part and against the claim of a part of that whole to exercise power over the whole. But it was a sad day for us when we surrendered the name Catholic to that part of the Church which failed in its catholicity, and so – as well as in other ways – failed in catholicity ourselves. As *Protestant Catholic* theology our theology will maintain the Catholic vision as embodying a continuous protest against the substitution of any finite reality including the Church for the sovereign of the Church – a substitution of which not only Romanism has been guilty. And as Protestants we will protest in the Church against seizure of power in the Church by any part. But the gift of the Catholic vision does not allow us to exclude from our companionship those against whom we protest, for they are parts of the Catholic Church. It is the gift and duty of Protestant Catholicism to be more Catholic than Romanism is, to be in short the movement of Catholic reformation. For reformation there must be as long as there is Catholic Christianity.<sup>434</sup>

This same line of thought also resurfaces in further reflections on what Niebuhr calls 'church-centered henotheism' in which the critical gap or distinction between God and the community of faith fails to be observed. The necessary polarity between divine objectivity and human subjectivity is again collapsed or conflated in subtly ruinous ways. As he understands it:

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<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>434</sup> HRN, 'The Gift of the Catholic Vision,' *op. cit.*, p. 517.

In church-centered faith the community of those who hold common beliefs, practice common rites, and submit to a common rule becomes the immediate object of trust and the cause of loyalty. The church is so relied upon as source of truth that what the church teaches is believed and to be believed because it is the church's teaching; it is trusted as the judge of right and wrong and as the guarantor of salvation from meaninglessness and death. To have faith in God and to believe the church become one and the same thing. To be turned toward God and to be converted to the church become almost identical; the way to God is through the church. So the subtle change occurs from radical monotheism to henotheism. The community that pointed to the faithfulness of the One now points to itself as his representative, but God and church have become so identified that often the word "God" seems to mean the collective representation of the church. God is almost defined as the one who is encountered in the church or the one in whom the church believes. History is reinterpreted so that the story of the mighty deeds of God in creation, judgment, and redemption is replaced by church history or "holy history," an account of special deeds whereby the special community was formed and saved. Rites, instead of being dramatic re-enactments of what God has done, is doing, and will do to men, become divine enactments in a closed society; the deeds of the church or its priests tend to be identified with the deeds of God. The unity of the church, the holiness of the church, and the universality of the church are valued not so much because they reflect the unity, holiness, and universal dominion of God but as ends to be sought for the sake of the church or as virtues to be celebrated because in them the true being of the church comes to appearance. In such ecclesiasticism echoes of monotheism continue to be heard. The God to whom reference is made in every act of worship and in every proclamation of the church's message is still to some extent acknowledged as the principle of being. Yet the confusion is there between that objective principle and its image in the church. The God of the Christian church has become confused with a Christian God, the One beyond all the many with the collective representation of a church that is one community among many.<sup>435</sup>

The third major fallacy which Niebuhr sees at work within the life of the Church is an overemphasis upon, and thus misunderstanding of, the role of the Bible. This is especially so in Protestantism, which has a long disputatious history here. Niebuhr's position is that 'the identification of the Scriptures with

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<sup>435</sup> HRN, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, op. cit., pp. 58-59.

God is an error, a denial of the content of the Scriptures themselves. To give final devotion to the book is to deny the final claim of God; to look for the mighty deeds of God only in the records of the past is to deny that he is the living God; to love the book as the source of strength and of salvation is to practice an idolatry that can bring only confusion into life.<sup>436</sup> Niebuhr's position is thus much closer to the classical insights of such Reformers as Luther and Calvin, and to the subsequent mainstream Reformation tradition, than it is to either a reductionist and thus compromised liberalism, or a fundamentalism fixated on the doctrine of verbal inerrancy.<sup>437</sup>

James Gustafson has written in his introduction to Niebuhr's posthumously published *The Responsible Self*, that 'Scripture is the unique and indispensable but mediate and derived authority for our knowledge of God and our existence before him.'<sup>438</sup> These comments may be taken as a fair interpretation of Niebuhr's understanding of the authority and role of the Bible within the life and work of the Church. 'Without the Bible, as without the Church, Christians do not exist and cannot carry on their work; but it is one thing to recognize the indispensability of these means, another thing to make means into ends.'<sup>439</sup> These remarks indicate that for Niebuhr, the authority of both the Bible and the Church is more nearly functional or instrumental. Further evidence of these convictions is to be found in the following autobiographical reflections which he offered near the end of his career; reflections which show how his determinative principle of a radically monotheistic reformation was still very much to the fore:

If my Protestantism led me in the past to protest against the spirit of capitalism and of nationalism, of communism and technological civilization, it now leads me to protest against the deification of Scriptures and the church. In many circles today we have substituted for the religion-centered faith of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a church-centered faith, as though the historical and visible church were the representative of God on earth, as though the Bible were the only word that God is speaking. I do not see how we can

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<sup>436</sup> HRN, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, op. cit., pp. 43-44.

<sup>437</sup> For a recent treatment of related themes, see John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

<sup>438</sup> HRN, *The Responsible Self*, op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>439</sup> HRN, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, op. cit., p. 44.

witness to the divine sovereignty without being in the church nor how we can understand what God is doing and declaring to us in our public and private experiences without the dictionary of the Scriptures, but it seems to me that in our new orthodox movements we are moving dangerously near to the untenable positions against which the Reformation and the 18<sup>th</sup> century revival had to protest.<sup>440</sup>

We come now to the last of the major fallacies which Niebuhr identifies as cause for confusion and conflict in the life and work of the Church, and this is doubtless the most controversial of the four. 'The most prevalent, the most deceptive and perhaps ultimately the most dangerous inconsistency to which churches and schools are subject in our time (perhaps in all the Christian centuries) arises from the substitution of Christology for theology, of the love of Jesus Christ for the love of God and of life in the community of Jesus Christ for life in the divine commonwealth.'<sup>441</sup>

Earlier on in this chapter, when we were considering his definition of the three key terms *love*, *God* and *neighbour*, we noted that Niebuhr chose a particular strategy which involved placing comparatively greater emphasis on the humanity of Jesus rather than on his divinity, whilst yet affirming the reality of the latter. This is in keeping with Niebuhr's usual christological methodology, which we considered in detail in chapter two, written from an *evangelical* perspective. Again, it is important to try and appreciate why Niebuhr approaches the subject-matter as he does since a superficial reading of his comments could seriously misunderstand, not to say misrepresent, what is, in effect, a necessary, though often neglected, doctrinal issue, and one which has far-reaching implications for ecclesiology and mission.

In addressing his christological concerns here in an ecclesiological perspective, Niebuhr initially makes appeal to the doctrine of the Trinity, though, as elsewhere in his writings, the reference is rather brief and undeveloped. As always, the emphasis is strongly on the oneness of God, but

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<sup>440</sup> HRN, 'Reformation: Continuing Imperative,' op. cit., p. 250. For a more detailed analysis of Niebuhr's use of Scripture see Jeffrey S. Siker, 'H. Richard Niebuhr: Confessing with Scripture,' pp. 25-58 in *Scripture and Ethics: Twentieth Century Portraits*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1997.

<sup>441</sup> HRN, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, op. cit., p. 44.

nonetheless, the triune distinctions of Father, Son and Spirit are affirmed. Whether these distinctions are both ontological and functional for Niebuhr, or only the latter, will be left aside for the moment, though we did offer an assessment of this in the *evangelical* chapter. The specific point, however, which he seeks to make here in terms of ecclesiology is that 'in many churchly pronouncements the faith of Christians is stated as if their one God were Jesus Christ; as if Christ's ministry of reconciliation to the Creator were of no importance; as if the Spirit proceeded only from the Son . . . When this is done the faith of Christians is converted into a Christian religion for which Jesus Christ in isolation is the one object of devotion and in which his own testimony, his very character, his Sonship, his relation to the One with whom he is united, are denied.'<sup>442</sup>

It would be difficult to deny that these critical observations about the empirical life of the Church are not true. Niebuhr, as we saw elsewhere, calls this 'the Unitarianism of the Son'<sup>443</sup> since, to all intents and purposes, Jesus Christ in isolation has become the God and Saviour of Christians, without any adequate reference to the being and action of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. As so often is the case, when such subtle theological distinctions are ignored or unrecognised, they can significantly contribute to serious ecclesiological problems.

Historically and theologically we are dealing here with devout yet aberrant forms of faith that are unable to illuminate the more profound problems of human existence, suffering, guilt and destiny or to answer questions about human history in its wholeness. They tend moreover to make of that faith a religion much like all other human religions instead of a relation to the Transcendent that goes beyond all our religions. This confusion of the proximate with the final introduces many internal conflicts into the work of the churches and of theological education. It leads directly to the effort to emphasize the uniqueness of the Christian religion, to define it as the "true" religion, to recommend it because of its originality, to exaggerate the differences between Christian and Jewish faith, to re-erect walls of division that Jesus Christ broke

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<sup>442</sup> Ibid., p.45.

<sup>443</sup> HRN, 'The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church,' in *Theology, History and Culture*, op. cit., pp. 50-62, esp. pp. 53-55.



down, to exalt the followers of the one who humbled himself, to define the neighbor as fellow Christian. That the confusion has not led to greater spiritual disasters than have been encountered is doubtless due to the fact that Jesus Christ in his nature and witness is a constant corrective of the perversion of his worship.<sup>444</sup>

This perennial tendency towards what Niebuhr calls 'Christ-centered henotheism' is a theme to which he returns time and time again. His reading of many of the varied situations in which the Church is called to be and to witness, is that, tragically, this henotheistic confusion about the identity of Jesus Christ often leads to disturbing, even destructive consequences. Pursuing this christological line of thought, and its distorting impact upon the sort of ecclesiology that almost inescapably goes with it, he writes:

The significance of Jesus Christ for the Christian church is so great that high expressions about his centrality to faith are the rule rather than the exception in the language of preaching and of worship. Yet it is one thing for Christians to look forward to the day when "every tongue [will] confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" – to use the words of an ancient liturgical hymn (Phil. 2:11) – and another thing for theology as well as popular piety to substitute the Lordship of Christ for the Lordship of God. At various times in history and in many areas of piety and theology Christianity has been transformed not only into a Christ-cult or a Jesus-cult but into a Christ- or Jesus-faith. The person through whom Christians have received access to God, the one who so reconciled them to the source of being that they are bold to say "Our father who art in heaven," the one who in unique obedience, trust, and loyalty lived, died, and rose again as Son of God, is now invested with such absolute significance that his relation to the One beyond himself is so slurred over that he becomes the center of value and the object of loyalty. The confidence that is expected of Christians is confidence in him; the formulation of the confidence in creed and theology becomes a set of assertions about Jesus Christ; theology is turned into Christology. And with this turn there is also a frequent turn to ecclesiasticism [see the previous distortion] insofar as the community that centers in Jesus Christ is set forth both as the object of his loyalty and of the Christian's loyalty. To be a Christian now means not so much that through the mediation and the pioneering faith of Jesus Christ a man has become wholly human, has been called into membership in the society of universal being, and has accepted the fact that amidst the totality of existence he is not

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<sup>444</sup> HRN, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, op. cit., pp. 45-46.

exempt from the human lot; it means rather that he has become a member of a special group, with a special god, a special destiny, and a separate existence.<sup>445</sup>

And so we come to Niebuhr's concluding comments on these various deformations of the true nature of the being and well being of the Church. As he puts it in the following summary paragraph:

Denominationalism not the denominations; ecclesiasticism not the churches; Biblicism not the Bible; Christism not Jesus Christ; these represent the chief present perversions and confusions in Church and theology. There are many other less deceptive, cruder substitutions of the proximate for the ultimate. But the ones described seem to set the great problems to faith and theology in our time. In them the need for a constant process of a radically monotheistic reformation comes to appearance.<sup>446</sup>

Throughout his writings, Niebuhr provides a sustained critique of the Church. This is more nearly prophetic, rather than merely denunciatory, because he writes as an 'insider', as one who loves the Church and believes passionately in its divinely-appointed and divinely-enabled life and mission. If his is often in large measure a 'negative ecclesiology'<sup>447</sup> it is only because he is concerned for the Church to be faithful to the truth of the gospel, the good news of God's grace manifest in Jesus Christ, and expressed by him in the New Testament in an imperative that is both simple and profound: 'love God and love your neighbour.' Niebuhr's prophetic analysis of any 'deformations' in the life and witness of the Church is offered as a contribution to, and aspect of, a greater task, that of suggesting possible ways in which this community can be changed or reformed so as to be more truthful and faithful to the calling of its Lord. In the next section of this chapter, we will consider Niebuhr's own 'positive' proposals for the ongoing 'reformation' of the Church.

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<sup>445</sup> HRN, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, op. cit., pp. 59-60; see also HRN, *The Responsible Self*, op. cit., p. 172 for a similar rendering of this, by now familiar Niebuhrian conviction.

<sup>446</sup> HRN, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>447</sup> The phrase is that of Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, New York, 1990, p. xix and is quoted by John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 166.

#### 4. The Reformation of the Church: The Responsible Church as 'Christo-morphic' Apostle, Pastor and Pioneer

In his often-quoted autobiographical article published in 1960, Niebuhr reflects upon his own life's work. In the process he gives us a clear indication of the vital tasks that are both perennial for any Christian theologian and also of urgent personal importance for him in the immediate future, thus enabling us to appreciate what he sees as the relative weight of emphasis between prophetic critique and constructive proposal. 'My primary concern today . . . is not to protest. It is still that of the reformation of the church. I believe that reformation is a permanent movement, that *metanoia* is the continuous demand made on us in historical life. The immediate reformation of the church that I pray for, look for and want to work for in the time that may remain to me is its reformation not now by separation from the world but by a new entrance into it without conformity to it. I believe our separation has gone far enough and that now we must find new ways of doing what we were created to do.'<sup>448</sup>

Niebuhr, as ever, describes the contemporary existential situation of selves and their societies in powerful and moving language, trapped as these 'social selves' are in their various aspects of 'idolatry, disillusionment and emptiness'. All of this calls for a response from the Church, and thus prompts Niebuhr to offer the outline of an answer in the closing paragraph of his article. 'I do not believe that we can meet in our day the need which the church was founded to meet by becoming more orthodox or more liberal, more biblical or more liturgical. I look for a resymbolization of the message and the life of faith in the One God. Our old phrases are worn out; they have become clichés by means of which we can neither grasp nor communicate the reality of our existence before God. Retranslation is not enough; more precisely, retranslation of traditional terms – "Word of God," "redemption," "incarnation," "justification," "grace," "eternal life" – is not possible unless one has direct relations in the immediacy

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<sup>448</sup> HRN, 'Reformation: Continuing Imperative,' *The Christian Century* 77 (1960), p. 250. Note that this was also published as 'How My Mind Has Changed,' in *How My Mind Has Changed*, ed., H.E. Fey, Cleveland, Meridian Books, 1961, pp. 69-80.

of personal life to the actualities to which people in another time referred to with the aid of such symbols.<sup>449</sup>

Evident in these remarks is Niebuhr's continued wrestling with the prevailing options and predominant tendencies in the ecclesiastical context of the time. Once again, one notes his willingness to engage with the differing approaches found in ecclesial life in general, and theological practice in particular. One notices too, his acknowledgment of the, as he sees it, comparative strengths and weaknesses inherent in various approaches, but that he is finally unwilling to give exclusive allegiance to any of the existing options, thus leaving open some space for his own preferred alternative. However, it is just here, in the task of providing more detail to his intriguing sketch, that Niebuhr proves to be most frustrating or unsatisfactory. 'I do not know how this resymbolization in pregnant words and in symbolic deeds . . . will come about. I do count on the Holy Spirit and believe that the words and deeds will come about. I also believe, with both the prophets and, of all men, Karl Marx [a brave affirmation to make at that time in the U.S.A.], that the reformation of religion is the fundamental reformation of society. And I believe that nothing very important for mankind will happen as a result of our "conquest" of space or as a result of the cessation of the cold war unless the human spirit is revived within itself.'<sup>450</sup>

If that were all that could be said, then Niebuhr's tentative suggestions for an alternative strategy or more satisfactory imagery as regards the reformation or 'resymbolization' of the church would be devoid of any interest. However, some scholars have proposed that Niebuhr himself had already provided some rich resources for such a promising new image of a reformed church: that image is the one that emerged in his symbol of the human being as 'the responsible self', an image based upon a fresh consideration of Jesus Christ as the embodiment of 'fitting response' to God's creative, governing and redemptive actions. Therefore, it is suggested, as the 'Body of Christ', the Church may be said, in some way, to be responsible to God for the world as its consciously

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<sup>449</sup> HRN, 'Reformation: Continuing Imperative,' *op. cit.*, p. 251.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*

'Christo-morphic community'.<sup>451</sup> Interestingly, we can go as far back in Niebuhr's corpus as 1946, in order to carry out an exposition and interpretation of his earliest, and in some ways, most detailed treatment of this theme.<sup>452</sup>

We are already familiar from chapter three, with the logic of Niebuhr's ethics of responsibility. We are thus on familiar ground when we find him saying that '[t]o be responsible is to be able and required to give account *to* someone *for* something. The idea of responsibility, with the freedom and obligation it implies, has its place in the context of social relations. To be responsible is to be a self in the presence of other selves, to whom one is bound and to whom one is able to answer freely; responsibility includes stewardship or trusteeship over things that belong to the common life of the selves.'<sup>453</sup>

Thus far in our analysis of his work, we have seen that the thrust of Niebuhr's argument has been based on an understanding of responsibility as it occurs in personal, or better still, interpersonal contexts, where 'social selves' may also be described as 'responsible selves'. The human being as a social self or responsible self is called, in a Christian context, to be responsible *to* 'God-in-Christ and Christ-in-God' *for* the world that God has placed him or her in, a world that, as we have seen before, is the arena of divine creative, governing and redemptive action.<sup>454</sup> But the concept of responsibility is not simply to be confined to the ethics of the personal. It also has relevance to the Church as that community whose centre is confessed to be 'God-in-Christ' and which is thus called, like Christ himself, to exercise universal responsibility *to* the One God *for* all that is the object of his faithful, sovereign love. 'Such universal responsibility is incompatible with a spiritualism that limits the church's concern to immaterial values, with a moralism that does not understand the value of the sinner and the sinful nation, with an individualism that makes

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<sup>451</sup> See, for example, Lonnie D. Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, Waco, Texas, Word Books, 1977, pp. 151-161; R. Melvin Keiser, *Roots of Relational Ethics: Responsibility in Origin and Maturity in H. Richard Niebuhr*, Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1996, pp. 177-193; Terrence Owen Sherry, *Shaped by Christ: The Christo-morphic hermeneutical theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, Ph.D. dissertation, Claremont Graduate University, 1997.

<sup>452</sup> HRN, 'The Responsibility of the Church for Society,' In *The Gospel, the Church and the World*, ed. K. S. Latourette, New York, Harper and Bros., 1946, pp. 111-133.

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 117-119.

mankind as a whole and its societies of less concern to God than single persons, and with any of those particularistic and polytheistic theories of value and responsibility which substitute for God-in-Christ some other deity as the source of valuable being.<sup>455</sup>

According to Niebuhr, the Church can be 'irresponsible' in two major ways to which he gives the labels 'worldliness' and 'isolationism'. For instance, when the Church 'thinks of itself as responsible to society for God rather than to God for society' it inevitably finds itself entangled in a swathe of compromises and competing concerns for which the word 'idolatry' is an apt description, and which results eventually in the manifold misery of fallen and faithless existence. In Niebuhr's judgement, this has been the predominant characteristic of the church with which he is most familiar, that of the industrial West in the twentieth century. As a reaction to the corporate sin of 'worldliness' Niebuhr notes that another form of irresponsibility, which he calls 'isolationism', often occurs. His view is that this is 'the heresy opposite to worldliness. It appears when the church seeks to respond to God but does so only for itself' and thus 'regards the secular societies with which it lives as outside the divine concern.'<sup>456</sup> Whilst partially understandable as a reactionary response to the too worldly church, Niebuhr nonetheless sees this as a serious misreading of the gospel which is meant for every aspect of the entire world.<sup>457</sup>

The true measure of the Church's responsibility is not to be found, however, by attending to either extreme or by seeking for a compromise position between them but rather by attending to the two aspects of Christian responsibility in the right way. The relation to God and the relation to society must neither be confused with each other as is the case in social religion, nor separated from each other as is the case in Christian isolationism; they must be maintained in the unity of responsibility to God for the neighbor.<sup>458</sup>

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<sup>455</sup> Ibid., pp. 119-120.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid., pp. 120-126.

<sup>458</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

Niebuhr's proposal is that whilst the 'Church's responsibility to God for human societies' doubtless varies due to differing contexts, nonetheless 'it may be described in a general fashion by reference to the apostolic, the pastoral and the pioneering functions of the Christian community.'<sup>459</sup> To each of these three aspects: the responsible Church as apostle, pastor and pioneer, we now turn in greater detail.

First, the Church in its *apostolic responsibility* is called, equipped and sent with the task of 'announcing the Gospel to all nations and of making them disciples of Christ. The function of the Church as apostolic messenger to individuals is clear-cut, but emphasis upon it ought not to lead to the obscuring of its mission to social groups.'<sup>460</sup> It would appear, however, that '[t]he Church has not yet in its apostolic character made the transition from an individualistic to a social period' even though it 'seems the more urgent in our time because the unbelief, the fear and sin of man come to exhibition more dramatically in the public life than elsewhere.'<sup>461</sup>

Clearly, then, part of this apostolic responsibility will involve 'the prophetic function of preaching repentance. The good news about the glory of divine goodness is neither rightly proclaimed nor rightly heard if it is not combined with the bad news about the great justice which prevails in God's world.'<sup>462</sup> But whatever side of the message needs proclaiming at any particular juncture, whether grace or judgement, the Church must address not just 'governments' or 'officials' or the so-called 'mighty', but also 'nations and societies' or what Niebuhr calls 'the great mass' of the human community. 'How the Church is to carry out this apostolic task in our time is one of the most difficult problems it confronts. Its habits and customs, its forms of speech and its methods of proclamation come from a time when individuals rather than societies were in the center of attention.'<sup>463</sup> Once again, Niebuhr seems to be returning to themes that were of perennial concern to him, namely 'language' and 'methods of

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<sup>459</sup> Ibid.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid., pp. 126-127.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid.

communication', ever in search of ways of sharing the Christian message that fit best with changing circumstances and new contexts.

Second, the Church has a *pastoral responsibility* in which it 'responds to Christ-in-God by being a shepherd of the sheep, a seeker of the lost, the friend of publicans and sinners, of the poor and brokenhearted.' Yet a consequence 'of its pastoral interest in individuals' has been that 'the Church has found itself forced to take an interest in political and economic measures or institutions.' This will always be the case in genuine pastoral ministry. 'The Church cannot be responsible to God for men without becoming responsible for their societies. As the interdependence of men increases in industrial and technological civilization the responsibility for dealing with the great networks of interrelationships increases. If the individual sheep is to be protected the flock must be guarded.'<sup>464</sup> However, it should be noted that such pastoral responsibility of the Church for society is 'direct as well as indirect' for when great humanitarian crises occur it 'cannot be sufficient for the Church to call upon the governments of nations to feed the hungry and clothe the naked.' Rather, the Church should address such issues and meet such needs directly as the community of Christ's care and compassion in the world.<sup>465</sup>

Third, and finally, in its role as *social pioneer*, Niebuhr says that the 'Church is that part of the human community which responds first to God-in-Christ and Christ-in-God. It is the sensitive and responsive part in every society and mankind as a whole. It is that group which hears the Word of God, which sees His judgments, which has the vision of the resurrection. In its relations with God it is the pioneer part of society that responds to God on behalf of the whole society' a principle that we find in the prophetic remnant within Hebrew society, who spoke and lived in such fashion as to call Israel to be 'a light to the nations' so that all peoples would eventually be blessed. However, this 'idea of representational responsibility is illustrated particularly by Jesus Christ' for 'he is the first-born of many brothers not only in resurrection but in rendering obedience to God. His obedience was a sort of pioneering and representative

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<sup>464</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>465</sup> Ibid., pp. 129-130.



obedience; he obeyed on behalf of men, and so showed what men could do and drew forth a divine response in turn toward all the men he represented. He discerned the divine mercy and relied upon it as representing men and pioneering for them.<sup>466</sup>

Reiterating a point from earlier in his argument, Niebuhr says that this idea of 'pioneering or representational responsibility has been somewhat obscured during the long centuries of individualist overemphasis. Its expression in the legal terms of traditional theology is strange and often meaningless to modern ears.' But now that there is a growing awareness of the fact that we are social selves living in increasingly interdependent relations in the 'global village' of modernity or post-modernity, we are surely being urged to consider more seriously a more appropriate anthropology than simply individualism or atomism. 'In this representational sense the Church is that part of human society, and that element in each particular society, which moves toward God, which as the priest acting for all men worships Him, which believes and trusts in Him on behalf of all, which is first to obey Him when it becomes aware of a new aspect of His will.'<sup>467</sup>

An especially important aspect of this pioneering or representational responsibility is in the realm of ethics where the Church is called to be 'the first to repent for the sins of a society' and thus 'repents on behalf of all' taking the lead 'in the social act of repentance.' In an era when we see such 'dramatic revelations of the evils of nationalism, of racialism and of economic imperialism it is the evident responsibility of the Church to repudiate these attitudes within itself and to act as the pioneer of society in doing so. . . As the representative and pioneer of mankind the church meets its social responsibility when in its own thinking, organization and action it functions as a world society, undivided by race, class and national interests.'<sup>468</sup> A measure of just how important this third function of pioneering or representational

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<sup>466</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>467</sup> Ibid., p. 131. Note the similarities to Barth's notion of the Church in its status or role of 'provisional representation' in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, op. cit., 1V/1, pp. 643-739; 1V/2, pp. 614-726; 1V/3, pp. 681-901.

<sup>468</sup> HRN, 'The Responsibility of the Church for Society,' op. cit., pp. 131-132.

responsibility is in the life of the Church can be found in the closing paragraph of Niebuhr's essay:

This seems to be the highest form of social responsibility in the Church. It is the direct demonstration of love of God and neighbor rather than a repetition of the commandment to self and others. It is the radical demonstration of faith. Where this responsibility is being exercised there is no longer any question about the reality of the Church. In pioneering and representative action of response to God in Christ the invisible Church becomes visible and the deed of Christ is reduplicated.<sup>469</sup>

This 1946 paper was Niebuhr's first explicit exploration of the concept of responsibility, and it is remarkable how consistent its insights are with those that we explored in the previous chapter on his ethics. We now bring our analysis in this chapter to a close with a final section in which we look at how Niebuhr understands and articulates what we will here call the 'spirituality' of the Church as a properly responsible 'Christo-morphic' community.

## **5. The Spirituality of the Church: 'Participation in the Present Passion'**

The main textual resource for our exposition of this theme is a sermon which Niebuhr published in 1951 entitled 'Participation in the Present Passion.'<sup>470</sup> In a letter to his brother Reinhold, Niebuhr had once spoken of the fact that though he, Richard, was best known as a seminary theologian and ethicist, he nonetheless still maintained that 'I remain a preacher more than anything else.'<sup>471</sup> Our research into Niebuhr's corpus leads us to concur with his own assessment, for not only was there a good preacher's feel for, and use of,

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<sup>469</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>470</sup> HRN, 'Participation in the Present Passion,' *Pulpit Digest* 32, 1951, pp. 27-32.

<sup>471</sup> HRN letter to Reinhold Niebuhr, exact date unknown, though approximately late 1930's, and cited in Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1985, p. 183.

appropriate and evocative language, even in his more academic writings, but the few sermons that have been made available in published form provide powerful evidence of the fact that he savoured and excelled in the preacher's craft.<sup>472</sup>

This was all of a piece with the fact that Niebuhr felt that his primary calling was to work within, and for the betterment of, the Church, in its task of faithfully witnessing to the love of God incarnate in Jesus Christ. The specific occasion for the paper that we will now analyse was Niebuhr being called upon to prepare and preach a sermon for World-Wide Communion Sunday at a worship service in which the congregation was celebrating the Lord's Supper. The two texts that he chooses for his exposition are Isaiah 53:5-6 and Matthew 25:40, and these provide the scriptural basis for a poignant and penetrating meditation upon the 'Christo-morphic' responsibility that comes with our corporate belonging to the Church.

In one sense, what we are being offered here is the nearest thing to a 'sacramental theology' that Niebuhr gives us anywhere in his writings. But for those who hope that Niebuhr will engage in a detailed technical discussion of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, there is evident yet again, his characteristic reluctance to pursue the sort of study that some theologians might expect or want. 'There have been unfortunate disagreements among Christians about the real presence of Christ in the sacrament. They are unfortunate because the eternal Christ is real in so many meanings of that word and we cannot catch his reality in any of our definitions. We shall not enter into those arguments now, but rather remind ourselves of one, of only one, of the ways in which this sacrament is a participation in the life of the Christ who is in this present moment as we worship here together and as we take communion.'<sup>473</sup>

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<sup>472</sup> See, for example, as well as the sermon cited above in footnote 469; HRN, 'What Then Must We Do?' *The Christian Century Pulpit* 5, 1934, pp. 145-147; HRN, 'Two Lenten Meditations: 'Tired Christians' and 'Preparation for Maladjustment,' *Yale Divinity News* 35, 3, 1939, pp. 3-4; HRN, Three Sermons entitled: 'Our Reverent Doubt and the Authority of Christ,' 'The Logic of the Cross,' and 'Man's Work and God's' in HRN, *Theology, History and Culture*, ed., William Stacy Johnson, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1996, pp. 192-214.

<sup>473</sup> HRN, 'Participation in the Present Passion,' *op. cit.*, p. 28.

Niebuhr's sermon indicates the three time dimensions of the Lord's Supper. 'When we take communion we participate in the life of the eternal Christ who was, and is to be, and is. We remember an event that is past; we anticipate an event that is to come; we participate in an event that is now going on.'<sup>474</sup> In the evangelical chapter, we looked at the past event of which the Supper is a 'remembrance'; and in the eschatological chapter yet to come, we will consider more fully the future event that Niebuhr says the Supper anticipates; but for the purpose of this section of the ecclesiological chapter, we now look more closely at those present events that constitute the main thrust and urgency of his exposition. In his sermon on the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, we are really being given what amounts to Niebuhr's *spirituality*, one that is fully consonant with, indeed an expression of, his distinctive *theologia crucis*, what he himself calls our 'participation in the present passion.' Since so much of Niebuhr's theology, ethics and spirituality all converge and cohere in these reflections, it is well worth quoting them extensively. Furthermore, since this document has received comparatively little attention in other Niebuhrian scholarship, it is all the more important that we allow Niebuhr to speak directly to us.

'At this moment, under this sun, present with us on our little earth, are countless sufferers.'<sup>475</sup> The miserable plight of these, often anonymous multitudes, is spelt out by Niebuhr with typically poignant sensitivity. 'In our unconverted, Christless minds we want to have as little part in this suffering as possible. We try to isolate ourselves from it; we say that we cannot stand thinking about it. We excuse ourselves by saying that we have had no part in causing it and we can do nothing effective to prevent it. We will not participate in it beyond its appearance in our own homes, though even there we often try to insulate ourselves against it as much as possible.'<sup>476</sup>

'But as we eat this bread and drink of this cup in fellowship with the Christ who suffered we know that we actually participate and we will to participate in the present passion of our brothers and sisters, even the least of them. In the

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<sup>474</sup> Ibid.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid.

<sup>476</sup> Ibid., pp. 28-30.

light of our memory of the Christ who suffered for us we look again at these men and women on the crosses of the present world and acknowledge, "They are being wounded for our transgressions, they are being bruised for our iniquities." This prompts Niebuhr to offer one of his most thought-provoking images in the whole of what I have been designating his *theologia crucis*:

The threads of responsibility run back and forth through space and time, from person to person in such an intricate pattern that none of us is uninvolved in any cross. Were it not for Jesus Christ who suffered under Pontius Pilate, a Christ who suffered without sin, we doubtless could not acknowledge that these suffering men and women, who are so much like ourselves and among whom we also have been and will be numbered at some time in our lives, are suffering vicariously for the sins of others. But this is evidently not true, that it is only Jesus who is wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities. When we sit at this table with Christ we sit down at the common human table where we are surrounded by those who are suffering now for our sins and for the sins of the whole world. They are eating bread with us, though it be with tears. We are participating with them in their sufferings as we acknowledge that they are bearing our crosses.<sup>477</sup>

The 'Christo-morphic' theme of Niebuhr's *theologia crucis* is once again evident as the cumulative argument of his meditation gathers momentum. 'Where is Christ today? Doubtless he is seated at the right hand of God. Doubtless he is present in the starving children and men and women of the world; doubtless he is being barred from churches, schools, and places of recreation because his face is black; doubtless he is being despised and rejected of men wherever folk who think they are superior cultures look down upon and offend one of the little ones. He is in the child rejected by its parents; he is with the prisoner cast out by society; he is with all those who are acquainted with grief, whether men call them righteous or wicked.'<sup>478</sup>

And so to the final two paragraphs of Niebuhr's published sermon, where the seasoned preacher shows that he knows his craft, bringing just the right

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<sup>477</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

touch of rhetoric and theological acumen together in his witness to the ministry of redemption in Christ:

In all this vicarious suffering for us and in all this present suffering of Christ we participate as we eat this bread and drink this cup. We take the sacrament as the bitter medicine of repentance, acknowledging our part in the continuous crucifixion. We do not know of any way in which we can rid ourselves of our participation in the sin of the world and the suffering of Christ for that sin. We cannot decide now that from henceforth we will not engage in any action whereby we shall cause others to suffer on our behalf, since they suffer because of our well-intentioned specious goodness as well as on account of our ill-will. The Lord's Supper in which we take the medicine of repentance is not a moralistic homily acted out in dramatic form by means of which we are adjured to try a little harder to be good. It is a presentation of reality. This is the way things are. This is what we are – the folk for whom Christ died and dies. This is what we are called upon to do - to participate in the sufferings of those who suffer for us. This is our medicine – we are to be healed by the stripes which we have inflicted.

We do not know in how many ways and from how many sins we are being healed by the sufferings of those who suffer for us. There is one thing, however, of which we are aware: that when we refuse to suffer with those who suffer for us we are confirmed in our self-centredness, we are established in our isolation from the human family and from God. We do know that participation in the sufferings of those who suffer for us heals us of our egoism, calls us back from wandering each in his own way and makes us members of the one family, where if one member suffers all the members suffer with him. The passion of Christ in which we now participate not only shows us some of the meaning of human suffering but by making and allowing us to participate in it that passion does some of its work of healing upon us. We therefore take this sacrament to our comfort; not comfortably, for it is a bitter medicine, but as those who are comforted by the ministrations of the Great Physician who is healing all our diseases, forgiving all our iniquities, redeeming our lives from destruction, and holding before us the supreme promise of lives crowned with loving kindness and tender mercy.<sup>479</sup>

According to Douglas John Hall '[t]here is more about the suffering of the church in the newer Testament's writings than about any other ecclesiastical

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<sup>479</sup> Ibid.

theme.<sup>480</sup> What Niebuhr offers us, as amply illustrated by the sermon just examined, is the shape of the Christian life, a 'Christo-morphic' way of life, which, in its substance and style, he calls our 'participation in the present passion' of Jesus Christ 'who is the same yesterday, today and forever.' This spirituality is inextricably bound to Christ and is found in, and expected of, his continuing Body on earth, the Church, whenever it is true to its Lord's calling. It is therefore radically different from the many self-indulgent and faddish 'spiritualities' that have become so prevalent in the modern or 'post-modern' West. For Niebuhr, then, as for others, of a similar disposition, 'the *theologia crucis* leads inevitably to an *ecclesia crucis*. A gospel which has at its core the cross of the Christ (*crux sola nostra theologia*) must produce a *koinonia* whose life is marked by suffering.'<sup>481</sup> Such a spirituality is not exclusively or predominantly predisposed to life's dark or negative experiences, but it refuses to ignore or suppress the reality of suffering within the greater context of the gospel. Perhaps it would be going too far to borrow the words of a Canadian poet/novelist turned singer/songwriter, and say that Niebuhr's distinctive *theologia crucis* sounds at times, like the anguished strains of a 'cold and broken Hallelujah.'<sup>482</sup> Faith in God does and should evoke human praise, but without acknowledgement of the solidarity of suffering, such doxology is not so much an expression of an authentic *theologia crucis* but its cheap caricature, the kind of deceptive triumphalism which Niebuhr was ever on his guard against, and which Luther called the *theologia gloriae*.

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<sup>480</sup> Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross*, Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1986, p. 123. Hall's work is perhaps the closest in substance and style to Niebuhr's among contemporary theologians, and, in some ways, makes more explicit the motif of *theologia crucis* that Niebuhr undoubtedly often depicted, but rarely labelled as such. In Hall's chapter, 'The Church: Community of Suffering and Hope,' from the above book, there is much about the themes of Christ's participation in the human situation and its transformation in and through his suffering, a work in which the Church is called to share. Hall cites such New Testament references as Matthew 5:3-11; Romans 6:3-4; Romans 8:22 and Colossians 1:24 as 'crucial' to his argument.

<sup>481</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 143-144.

<sup>482</sup> The quote is from a song entitled, 'Hallelujah' written by Leonard Cohen, movingly recorded in a cover version by the late Jeff Buckley on his album *Grace*, Columbia, New York, 1994. For other contemporary musical expressions of the *theologia crucis*, John Bell and the Cathedral Singers, *The Last Journey: Songs for the Time of Grieving*, GIA Publications, Chicago, 1997; Adrian Snell, *Seven Words for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Serious Music UK Ltd, Slidrecht, 2002, in conjunction with the book of the same name edited by Edmund Newell and published by Darton, Longmann and Todd, London, 2002.

## 6. Conclusion

In drawing our reflections on Niebuhr's ecclesiology to an end, we recall the claim that he made in his autobiographical essay to the effect that his 'primary concern' was 'the reformation of the church' and this, not so much 'by separation from the world but by a new entrance into it without conformity to it.'<sup>483</sup> Our analysis in this chapter, has, I believe, borne out the truth of these convictions, for Niebuhr was constantly pondering how the Church could best be faithful, yet relevant, to the needs, demands and opportunities of each new situation in which it found itself.

In many ways, Niebuhr can justly be called an exemplary reformer of the Church. In his six-fold 'polar analysis' he manages to convey much of the essence of the mysterious reality of the *nature* of this strange 'Christo-centric' community, whilst acknowledging that such definitions can never entirely capture its meaning. In stating that the *purpose* of the Church was to accept and enact Jesus' indicative and imperative as defined in terms of 'the increase of the love of God and neighbour', he clarifies its mission in a simple yet searching manner. In identifying some of its *deformations* or *henotheisms*, he provides a critique that the Church neglects at its peril and to the detriment of its well-being and true calling; yet his is nonetheless a *constructive* critique in that he is keen to advocate strategies for the renewal and reformation of the Church so that it may better become a responsible 'Christo-morphic' community in its roles as corporate apostle, pastor and pioneer. In doing so, Niebuhr believes that the Church will truly be an *ecclesia crucis*, a Body of people who consciously enter into Christ's ministry with, among and for those who suffer vicariously for redemption's sake. This 'participation in the present passion' articulates the appropriate *spirituality* of those who are faithfully in communion with Jesus Christ. Such, in brief compass, is Niebuhr's ecclesiology.

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<sup>483</sup> HRN, 'Reformation: Continuing Imperative,' op. cit., p. 250.



## Chapter Five: An Ecumenical Perspective

### 1. A Relative Lack of Concern for Church-Union

The word 'ecumenical' is often taken to mean the aspiration for, or attempt, that the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ will be made visible in some sort of structural or institutional form. Whilst this is indeed one viable meaning of the term, it can also be thought of as being rather reductionist or one-dimensional. The Greek word *oikoumene*, in its biblical and subsequent classic usage in the field of theology, actually has a more expansive meaning in that it is intended to refer to 'the whole inhabited earth' or 'the One Household of Life'.<sup>484</sup>

The structure of this chapter will therefore try to reflect this enlarged understanding of the term. Working outwards from the centre of Niebuhr's work as already identified in his *theologis crucis*, we shall interpret it by means of a series of concentric, yet expanding circles. The *first* of these will be an analysis of the importance he attached, both practically and theoretically, to the task of *Church-union* between various parts of the Church. The *second* aspect will involve a proposed line of trajectory beyond this in which Niebuhr's work, especially through his distinctive approach to faith, called 'radical monotheism', will be considered in terms of its potential as a possible *reconciling resource* for the three predominant *official monotheisms*: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. *Thirdly*, an attempt will be made to ground Niebuhr's work in the specifics of a culture that has suffered much from communal conflict, namely, my own context in Northern Ireland. I intend to show that Niebuhr's work is a useful instrument of analysis that has intriguing and promising correspondences with the recent *Moving Beyond Sectarianism* Project in which I was personally involved. In the *fourth* and final circle, I propose to make more explicit the real, though largely implicit, evidences in Niebuhr's work, of a *larger ecumenism* that aligns him with some of the more

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<sup>484</sup> See Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement*. Geneva, WCC Publications, 1996. pp. 84-91; 102ff.

promising thinkers on the now increasingly prominent theme of 'globalisation'. Niebuhr, I will argue, in his occasional and scattered references to the themes of *ecology* and *economics* demonstrates the kind of radical responsibility that faith surely calls for.

We turn first of all to Niebuhr's views on, and involvement in, that aspect of ecumenism, which, for many people, defines the term without remainder, namely, Church-union. Whilst this thesis is primarily concerned with an interpretation of Niebuhr's mature theological position of radical monotheism, nonetheless, it will be useful here to briefly trace some points of historical development with regard to his contributions in efforts to bring about the structural unity of the Church. What will emerge is that whilst in the early part of his life's work, he was heavily involved in the attempt to bring different denominations together to form more inclusive unions, increasingly, with the passage of time, this urge and instinct waned somewhat. An exploration of the possible reasons for this gradual lack of concern for the work of structural Church-unions is worth pondering, since it suggests a subtle change of priorities or strategies in his evolving ministry.

Niebuhr was nurtured in a relatively small denomination called the 'Evangelical Synod of North America'. According to Jon Diefenthaler, a fellow member of this denomination, and the author of the nearest thing that we have to a biography of Niebuhr, the Evangelical Synod had its genesis in the so-called "Prussian Union" imposed by King Frederick Wilhelm III, in 1817, upon Lutheran and Reformed congregations whose relationship to each other had for a long time been marked by mutual abrasion and suspicion. In this instance, thankfully, political expediency did somehow manage to turn former polemicists into a new church in which a more pragmatic and irenic ethos began to prevail. In the 1840's some of these members immigrated to the New World where they formed the *Deutscher Evangelische Kirchenverein des Westens*, a name which was to become 'Americanised' to that of the 'German Evangelical Synod of North America' in 1866. Further evidence of the

denomination's acculturation was that in 1925, the word *German* was dropped.<sup>485</sup>

An intriguing confluence of factors served to shape the distinctive ethos of this, Niebuhr's, own denomination. Streams from Lutheran, Calvinist and Zwinglian sources merged with the more pietistic tendencies of evangelical missionaries sent from various European centres, such as Basel. This resulted in a type of faith that was arguably more an affair of the "heart" than the "head", less inclined to formal subscription to confessional creeds than were some other churches, and exemplified by an emphasis on the experiential and ethical aspects of the gospel. With the passage of time, this warm, open and pragmatic spirit was to advance the cause of the more progressive elements in the denomination who were eager for the 'Synod' to form whatever unions it could with other small, likeminded church bodies. 'In 1934 it united with the Reformed Church in the United States, which then numbered over 600,000 members. This new organization, known as The Evangelical and Reformed Church, merged in 1957 with the Congregational Christian Churches to become today's United Church of Christ.'<sup>486</sup>

Niebuhr, who, like his father Gustav and elder brother Reinhold, was educated by and ordained into the ministry of the German Evangelical Synod, was among the more progressive wing of the denomination. Greatly indebted as he was, and was to remain to the warmth of its 'liberal evangelicalism', he was nonetheless frustrated with the tendency of many within it to, as he saw it, stagnate in a kind of Germanic backwater. His conviction was that the Synod was called to enter more fully into the mainstream of the burgeoning life of American culture so as to carry out its mission as effectively as possible. He therefore was in the vanguard of those who took certain practical initiatives in accelerating its fuller immersion in the life of the enviroing society, plunging it into the pulsating and pluralistic mix of post-First World War America. As a demonstration of this desire he assumed the chairmanship in 1927 of his

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<sup>485</sup> Jon Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and World*, Georgia, Mercer University Press, 1986, p. 2.

<sup>486</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

denomination's Committee on Relations with Other Churches.<sup>487</sup> His goal at this time was to unite his own Synod with both the Reformed Church and the United Brethren but the hoped-for merger did not materialise at that time due to the withdrawal of the United Brethren and Niebuhr's own appetite for working at such structural unifications seems to have waned thereafter.

In his first book, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, Niebuhr had criticised the churches for their evident disunity noting that 'the organization which is loudest in its praise of brotherhood and most critical of race and class discriminations in other spheres is the most disunited group of all, nurturing in its own structure that same spirit of division which it condemns in other relations.'<sup>488</sup> The book as a whole is a passionate and poignant lament over such fragmentation; penetrating in substance, poetic in style, and issuing, in its concluding pages, a prophetic plea for the Church to become reunited in an ideal inspired by what Niebuhr calls 'the formation of a divine society [which] presupposes the metaphysics of a Christlike God. Its purpose is the revelation to men of their potential childhood to the Father and their possible brotherhood with each other.'<sup>489</sup> This is the voice of liberalism, to be sure, but it is not to be equated with that of von Harnack with his easy talk of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. Instead, it is a chastened or modified liberalism, as is hinted at by Niebuhr's qualifying words in the above quote, namely, 'potential' and 'possible'. So already, it seems, by the time of these reflections in 1929, and with two years of the frustrating, and even, somewhat disillusioning experience of trying to achieve a union of the three denominations named earlier on, Niebuhr's thoughts on ecumenicity in the form of Church-union, give evidence of an idealism being tempered somewhat by the agonized cries of a muted and implicit, but nonetheless, emergent or embryonic theology of the cross. As he puts it in the book's final paragraph:

The road to unity which love requires denominations, nations, classes and races to take is no easy way. There is no short cut even to the union of the churches. The way to

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<sup>487</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>488</sup> HRN, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, New York, Henry Holt and Co., 1929. Reprinted by Peter Smith, Gloucester, Mass., 1987, p. 9.

<sup>489</sup> Ibid., p. 278.

the organic, active peace of brotherhood leads through the hearts of peacemakers who will knit together, with patience and self-sacrifice, the shorn and tangled fibers of human aspirations, faiths, and hopes, who will transcend the fears and dangers of an adventure of trust. The road to unity is the road of repentance. It demands a resolute turning away from all those loyalties to the lesser values of the self, the denomination, and the nation, which deny the inclusiveness of divine love. It requires that Christians learn to look upon their separate establishments and exclusive creeds with contrition rather than pride. The road to unity is the road of sacrifice which asks of churches as of individuals that they lose their lives in order that they may find the fulfilment of their better selves. But it is also the road to the eternal values of a Kingdom of God that is among us.<sup>490</sup>

The note of liberal aspiration evident in the above sentiments was severely put to the test by Niebuhr's own involvement in the failed attempts to bring about the merger of his own Synod with the other two denominations previously mentioned in order to form a new church called the 'United Church in America'. Following the collapse of this tripartite venture, Niebuhr took no further formal part after 1930 in the continuing discussions which did lead to the union of his own Evangelical Synod with the Reformed church in 1934.<sup>491</sup> He was, of course, pleased with the satisfactory nature of this union<sup>492</sup> but increasingly, his ecumenical convictions were articulated in a way that pointed to an important shift of emphasis. Indeed, in his second book, *The Kingdom of God in America*, published in 1937, Niebuhr looked back upon his earlier practical priorities and methodological procedures with a self-critical eye. Briefly stated, he now believed that his denunciations of the divisions represented by denominationalism, whilst still justifiable, were predicated too much on the way in which the various streams of the Church were shaped by the forces of the enviroing society in which they were embedded. However, what that critique did not sufficiently attend to was the prior, even primordial power that was largely responsible for the surge and flow of the Church's river itself. Greater attention needed to be given to the initiating action of God's

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<sup>490</sup> Ibid., p. 284. For a similar line of thought see HRN, 'What Holds Churches Together?' *The Christian Century*, 43, 1926, pp. 346-348; 'Churches That Might Unite,' *The Christian Century*, 46, 1929, pp. 259-261.

<sup>491</sup> Diefenthaler, op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>492</sup> HRN, 'Now We Are Stronger', *The Messenger*, 19, 12, 1954, p. 4.

grace in Jesus Christ as the sine qua non of that new, transforming and eternal life which the 'One Church' was called to embody in and through its diverse and often divergent forms.<sup>493</sup> Speaking of what he called the necessity of the 'recovery of faith in the invisible catholic church' he observed that this entailed the effort 'to seek unity not on the level of hazy sentimentalism but [in] the active intellectual and moral conflict of those who can contend fruitfully because they share a common faith.'<sup>494</sup>

Several factors seem to have been at work in Niebuhr's shift of emphasis in the priorities of his ecumenical practice. His increasing immersion in, and appreciation of, the 'Great Tradition' in the history of theology undoubtedly played its part in grounding his future work in the Catholicity of the Church. This impulse may well have been reinforced by his move to the Divinity Faculty at Yale where his academic contacts and pursuits were immeasurably enlarged in scope since he was now part of an internationally renowned, non-denominational research and teaching establishment. But in addition, one can also conjecture, perhaps, that the passage of the years also saw Niebuhr attending to the profound crises of national and international affairs such that the work of formal Church-union, whilst not unimportant, nonetheless had to be placed in the arguably greater and graver context of such pressing problems as those thrown up by the Great Depression, the Second World War, the subsequent Cold War, and any number of other urgent societal issues.

An exhaustive analysis of all of Niebuhr's writings in which the ecumenical issue of church relations featured would be well beyond the scope of this thesis. However, a few significant selections from his corpus should enable us to make a reasonably informed judgment as to how his ecumenical perspective shifted over time. Writing in 1954, on the twentieth anniversary of the successful union of the Evangelical Synod and the Reformed Church, Niebuhr continued to affirm the search for visible expressions of the One Church of Jesus Christ, but took the opportunity to place his own convictions about the priorities and

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<sup>493</sup> HRN, *The Kingdom of God in America*, New York, Harper & Row, Torchbooks, 1937. Reprinted by Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Connecticut, 1988, pp. xix-xxvii.

<sup>494</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxvi.

strategies involved in the work of Church-union in a different context than when he was extensively involved in such practical pursuits in the late 1920's. 'Our interest in the unity of the church seems to be most constructively directed at the present time when it takes into view the opportunities we have to contribute to ecumenical organization and spirit. This seems a more significant movement at present, not only in its organizational but in its more spiritual and intellectual forms, than organic merger movements do.'<sup>495</sup>

Arguably, it was the circumstances of Niebuhr's own particular vocation which did most to shape or influence the direction of his perennially-held ecumenical impulse. In the three decades [1931-1962] during which he taught at Yale, the conviction seemed to grow that his own contribution to the ecumenical enterprise should be primarily in the area of theological education. A major catalyst here was the project to which he was appointed as director. Its task was research into, and the providing of far-reaching recommendations for, many of the leading theological educational colleges in North America. As a consequence of this work, to which Niebuhr gave undivided attention from 1954-56, his own insights, long maturing over many years, came to a new pitch of clarity and urgency. Whatever differences may indeed prevail between churches, denominations or their seminaries, the 'question of the ultimate objective of the whole Church' seems to come to a focal point in the attempt to identify, and as best possible embody, 'the final unifying consideration that modifies all the special strivings'.<sup>496</sup> We have already seen in the previous chapter, that Niebuhr's proposal is that the churches unify around the purpose that Jesus proclaimed: 'the love of God and neighbour'. What we also saw, and can further appreciate here, is that Niebuhr understands and expounds this in the distinctive idiom of 'radical monotheism', a faith stance that gives great prominence to the ecumenical thrust of the Church, or, as he puts it elsewhere, 'the catholic vision' of its properly 'ecclesial' existence.<sup>497</sup>

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<sup>495</sup> HRN, 'Now We Are Stronger', *The Messenger*, 19, 12, 1954, p. 4.

<sup>496</sup> HRN, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, op. cit., pp. 28-29.

<sup>497</sup> HRN, 'The Gift of the Catholic Vision', *Theology Today*, 4, 1948, pp. 507-521.

In one of his last published pieces, *The Seminary in the Ecumenical Age*, Niebuhr pursues this same theme with his customary insight couched, as was nearly always the case, in elegant rhetoric.<sup>498</sup> His particular emphasis is admittedly, here, to focus on the way in which theological education may best be pursued and conducted in the now prevailing reality of the 'ecumenical age'. But the underlying presuppositions in his lecture are worth unearthing since they enable us to appreciate what may be considered his mature position on the principles of practical ecumenism. He imaginatively envisages the work of Christian ministry as being that of 'building' some great 'world cathedral'<sup>499</sup> in the setting of 'the *oikumene* – the inhabited world, the one economy of mankind'.<sup>500</sup> As such, the ecumenical Church will not settle for any partial or provincial ways of existence as the definitive or exhaustive expressions of what it is called to be or do. Since the Church lives in, and ministers to, nothing less than 'a planetary parish'<sup>501</sup> it is incumbent upon it to seek new and more intentional ways of witnessing to Christ in this, now more consciously acknowledged, global context. Our ecumenical 'world', in this ecumenical 'age', therefore makes all the more desirable, or even, necessary, an ecumenical 'Church'.<sup>502</sup>

The imaginative insights of this article are largely in continuity with the views that Niebuhr had expounded in two significant earlier pieces.<sup>503</sup> What each of them share is the distinctive Niebuhrian way of recasting the issue of inter-church ecumenical relations within the larger horizon of 'radical monotheism'. Since the Church is called by the one God and Father of Jesus Christ to bear witness to his reconciling grace, and further, is called, in its own subordinate way, to continue this ministry of reconciliation to the world at large, then it is of the very 'being' and 'well-being' of the Church that it seeks to organise its internal life and world-oriented mission in such ways as to help,

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<sup>498</sup> HRN, 'The Seminary in the Ecumenical Age', *Theology Today*, 17, 1960, pp. 300-310. A footnote (p. 300) states that this was HRN's address at the inauguration of Dr. James I. McCord as President of Princeton Theological Seminary, March 29, 1960.

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 306.

<sup>500</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 307.

<sup>501</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 300.

<sup>502</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 307.

<sup>503</sup> HRN, 'The Gift of the Catholic Vision', (1948) *op. cit.*; *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, (1956) *op. cit.*



rather than hinder, this ecumenical or catholic thrust. But Niebuhr, characteristically, was more of an 'architect' who provided inspirational sketches for how the churches may best approximate to, or converge around this vocational task, than he was an 'engineer' who concerned himself on a daily basis with the 'nuts and bolts' of putting the various pieces together into a working whole. His prophet's eye for the Church's 'catholic vision' was his greatest gift to the still separate parts of the 'Body of Christ' and was seemingly where most of his abilities and energies lay. This is not to suggest that Niebuhr's vision of the Church was an excessively idealist or ethereal one. He was critical, for instance, of Brunner on this point, in that he felt that the Swiss theologian was too naively idealistic in considering the Church or *Ecclesia* as the spiritual fellowship of those who truly believe in Christ, in distinction or separation from those who merely belong to the visible institutional churches in some other less spiritually intentional sense.<sup>504</sup> But neither was he content to lay too much stress on the more structural or institutional dimension of the Church as opposed to its more communal or interpersonal aspect. In the necessary *polarity* between the Church as "community" and "institution", Niebuhr maintained that a situation of dialectical realism was the most adequate means of describing its *esse* and *bene esse*. As he put it:

[I]t seems clear that no community can exist without some institutions that give it form, boundaries, discipline, and the possibilities of expression and common action. On the other hand, no institution can long exist without some common mind and drive that expresses and defines itself in institutions. The questions whether Church is primarily institution or primarily community, or whether one of these is prior, are as unanswerable as similar questions about thought and language. There is no thought without language and no language without thought, yet thought is not language nor language thought. The Church as institution can preserve as well as corrupt the Church as community; it can express and define through word and deed the common mind as well as thwart the common spirit. The Church as community can enliven but also stultify the Church as institution. So it was in the case of the Nazi Christian community

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<sup>504</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Misunderstanding of the Church*, Lutterworth Press, 1952, London. The irony here in the title of his book is that Brunner felt that the prevailing view of the Church was a misunderstanding; whereas Niebuhr felt Brunner's interpretation was even more fallacious. See HRN, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, p. 21-22. See also the similar line of interpretation to Niebuhr's in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, op. cit., p. 669.

which twisted the meaning and eventually the forms of common Christian institutions; so it is also in the confusions of the Christian with the democratic community.<sup>505</sup>

This sense of finely held balance, a typically Niebuhrian stance, it might be said, exemplifies his strategy regarding the work of Church-union. Niebuhr's instincts, nurtured in his formative years within the ethos of the Evangelical Synod, were to endorse any ecumenical initiatives that would strengthen the bonds between churches, and thus approximate more closely to his vision of the Church of Jesus Christ in its true catholicity or universality. For him, the 'idea of *Una Sancta*, of One Holy Church, is very persuasive despite relatively rare expression'<sup>506</sup> and therefore, as he read it in the mid-1950's, despite many painful differences and conflicts still between the churches, 'the movement toward participation in the universal Church is the dominant one.'<sup>507</sup> Niebuhr's work to assess and redefine a 'catholic vision' for the Protestant seminaries of North America in the project which he directed during these years under the auspices of the American Association of Theological Schools may thus be seen as a major, perhaps, indeed, his main contribution to the 'ecumenical movement' within the churches. But, in addition, he was also an active participant, by way of theological essays, in the first two assemblies of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948 and in Evanston in 1954.<sup>508</sup> Yet despite these personal endorsements of, and involvements in, the ecumenical movement, Niebuhr could still voice a stringent critique of this self-same movement. When Charles Clayton Morrison, for instance, inferred that the Christian Church itself was the 'revelation of God', Niebuhr warned that such thinking was morally 'dangerous' since it mistakenly tended to turn the Church into just one more of the world's 'overly self-conscious communities' which make 'self-defense' the 'first law of life', and thus, in the process, take themselves much too seriously, usurping the place that belongs to God alone.<sup>509</sup>

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<sup>505</sup> HRN, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, p. 22.

<sup>506</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>507</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>508</sup> HRN, 'The Disorder of Man in the Church of God', in *Man's Disorder and God's Design*, volume 1, *The Universal Church in God's Design*, New York, 1949, pp. 78-88; 'Who Are the Unbelievers and What Do They Believe?', pp. 35-37.

<sup>509</sup> HRN, Review of *What is Christianity?* By Charles Clayton Morrison, *Journal of Religion* 21, April 1941, pp. 189-192.

It seems, therefore, that Niebuhr trod a fine line with regard to the search for the structural unity of the Church. Reflecting upon his own change of priorities over the course of his life he observed that ‘while once my interest had been strongly oriented toward the church-union movement, I now displayed little concern for that enterprise and looked elsewhere for the reformation of the church.’<sup>510</sup> The position being adopted and approved here, therefore, seems to be, one of ‘convergence’: wherever and whenever any church-unions can be effected, this should be encouraged and attempted. But any such movements towards organic or structural unity are subordinate to, and are meant to serve the purposes of, that radical monotheism that Niebuhr believes, forms the human expression of what God in Christ has called and enabled the One Church to be and become. If the work of Church-union is not undertaken in the ‘spirit and context’<sup>511</sup> of radical monotheism, then it, too, may become one more tragic example of that idolatrous form of faith that he called ‘henotheism’, albeit in so-called ‘Christian’ form. The irony, therefore, is that Christ continues to be crucified by the ongoing history of divided and divisive churches in their misreading of his intent for the One Church, and, consequently, they perpetuate the tragedy of their distorted relationships to each other.

## **2. A Reconciling Resource for the Monotheistic ‘Religions’?**

In the above section, we have looked at Niebuhr’s contribution to the work of inter-church relationships, that is, the underlying spirit and structural forms that are found in, or desirable for, the One Church of Jesus Christ. However, there are many faith communities other than the various churches, often commonly referred to as ‘religions’, though this term is not always descriptively accurate or even welcomed by many people. Nonetheless, for want of a better term, we intend the label ‘religion’ as used here, to refer to those historic faith

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<sup>510</sup> HRN, ‘Reformation: Continuing Imperative’, *The Christian Century*, 77, 2 March 1960, p. 248.

<sup>511</sup> HRN, ‘The Seminary in the Ecumenical Age’, op. cit., p.310.

communities that have monotheism as a basic tenet of their beliefs: namely, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Some elements of commonality can, in fact, be found among these three faiths: their belief in one God (monotheism) who governs the world with purposeful intent; a consequent expectation for human beings to live by a divinely-given morality; a common ancestry, in some sense, from the historic person of Abraham; and sets of scripture which render at least some of the same events.

However, what seems more striking still, are the real or perceived differences between these three 'monotheisms', often resulting, tragically, in a history of fear, suspicion, hostility and conflict. The situation in many places in our contemporary world continues to make clear the difficulties and dangers that are attendant with, and sometimes fuelled by, the differences that pertain between these faith communities. It is of the utmost urgency, therefore, that some sort of constructive ways be found for the adherents of each of these monotheisms, to meet, converse and thus relate so as to enable a peaceful, or at least tolerable future together. Leaving aside, for the meantime, the even wider issue of how the adherents of any *other* religious faith community, or of no explicit religion, may relate to each other, we turn here to consider how the three monotheisms might do so in the future. It would be a great gain surely, if some means were found by which Judaism, Christianity and Islam could replace mutual ignorance, indifference, suspicion or hostility with more positive and peaceful alternatives. Few could dispute the necessity and desirability of furthering this issue in the dynamics of contemporary global realities.

Niebuhr never went very far in exploring the issue of inter-faith dialogue or relationships, and so we will look in vain within his writings, for the sort of explicitly ecumenical effort between the world's three great 'official monotheisms' that would seem to be both desirable or necessary in our contemporary context. However, in *The Responsible Self*, he did demonstrate some of the principles that would probably have informed his own approach to this subject. 'I cannot think about God's relation to man in the abstract. The historical qualification of my relation to him is inescapable. I cannot presume to think as a Jew or a Mohammedan would think about God, though I recognize

that they are thinking about the same God about whom I think. Nor can I presume to rise above those specific relations to God in which I have been placed so as to think simply and theistically about God. There is no such being, or source of being, surely, as a Christian God (though there may be Christian idols); but there is a Christian relation to God and I cannot abstract from that'.<sup>512</sup>

According to Martin Cook, this is consistent with Niebuhr's self-avowed 'confessionalist' procedure or methodology as a Christian theologian, but one, which, in Niebuhr's case, is still open to the perspectives of representatives from other communities or traditions in what Cook labels 'confessional noninternalism'.<sup>513</sup> What Cook means by this latter term is to be found primarily in Niebuhr's *The Meaning of Revelation*, where he sought to expound a theological methodology that took seriously the 'internal' claims of the Christian community's revelatory event in Jesus, but also kept open a genuine dialogue with the distinct perspectives of those who may well interpret such events in different ways that are, in principle, understandable from their own history, yet which is 'external' to that of the community that confesses God in Christ. Cook argues that Niebuhr offers perhaps the most promising theological resource for a Christian 'confessionalism' that may yet initiate and sustain a meaningful dialogue with representatives of other communities.<sup>514</sup> Cook's argument does not deal primarily or explicitly with the subject of 'inter-faith' relations, whether 'monotheistic' or not, but the thrust of his argument is certainly directly applicable to the issue we are exploring here.

The proposal, or, at least, tentative suggestion to be made in this part of my thesis is that Niebuhr's distinctive interpretation on faith in the idiom of 'radical monotheism' may be a useful resource for attempting to relate the three

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<sup>512</sup> HRN, *The Responsible Self*, op. cit., pp. 44-45. Also worth noting is Niebuhr's remark that he believed that 'part of the function of the Christian minister was to universalise Judaism'. We may take this to mean, I presume, that the Christian Church ought to try and universalise the principle of 'radical monotheism' that lies at the heart of Niebuhr's interpretation of the Old (and New) Testament: see HRN, *Introduction to Theological Studies 1960-61*, transcribed by Elizabeth Keiser, 31 October 1960.

<sup>513</sup> Martin L. Cook, *The Open Circle: Confessional Method in Theology*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1991, p. 77.

<sup>514</sup> *Ibid.*, esp. pp. 67-85; 108.

'official' monotheistic faiths in a more positive and constructive manner. Our earlier analysis of the faith structure of the social self, points to the possibility of using the same procedure as applied to the historical enactments of Jewish, Christian and Islamic believers. Whilst Niebuhr's appellation 'radical monotheism' might sound to the contemporary ear as resonating in an uncomfortably familiar way with the violent extremes of certain strands of radical fundamentalism, Islamic or otherwise, in reality, in Niebuhrian terms, it offers, I would argue, both a self-critical principle, and a constructive vision, whose potential fruitfulness has yet to be seriously considered or attempted.

If, as I believe, Niebuhr's concept of human faith as radical monotheism can be accepted as basically belonging to the genre of 'prophetic wisdom', then this two-fold agenda of self-critique and constructive vision surely becomes a viable or plausible interpretation of life. We have already seen how Niebuhr puts this principle of radical monotheism to work within the context of Christian faith as expressed in theology and embodied in the life of the Church. By this prophetic standard, there is much that often passes for true Christian faith but which, in reality, is deformed into the various henotheisms of denominationalism, 'churchism', biblicism or even, as he calls it 'Christism'. But, more positively, there is also the ever-present impulse of a reformed catholic Christianity that is theocentric in ground and universal in scope due to the mediating presence and work of Jesus Christ.

Yet the logic of Niebuhr's prophetic principle is that radical monotheism may also be applicable beyond the arena of Christian theology or the life of the Church and those who so participate therein. His fundamental belief is in what he calls 'the sovereignty of God' with which he also associates two other basic convictions, namely 'the recognition of our human lostness, sinfulness and idolatrousness' as well as 'the understanding that trust in the ground of being is a miraculous gift.'<sup>515</sup> But the way in which he now reflects upon these convictions is interesting in that it begins in confessional mode, speaking, that is, an insider of the Christian tradition, but then opens out into an ecumenical

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<sup>515</sup> HRN, 'Reformation: Continuing Imperative', op. cit., pp. 248-249.

orientation that takes proper cognisance of the life and faith of those who may belong to different belief communities and thus reason on the basis of quite different presuppositions:

How it is possible to rely on God as unconquerably 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. It is the human possibility which has been made possible, as has also the enlistment of these unlikely beings, these human animals, ourselves, in his cause, the cause of universal creation and universal redemption. 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.*<sup>516</sup>

What Niebuhr seems to be doing here is to put to use his so-called method of 'confession and demonstration'. He is reasoning on the basis of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, through whom faith and forgiveness are mediated in face of the fact of human sin. But to thereby necessarily, and in principle, then make the further logical inference that God is *only* revealed to Christians, or that *only* those who consciously and explicitly acknowledge God's redeeming work in Christ can be said to have faith or be saved, is an unwarranted extrapolation. It is to fall once more into 'henotheism', that perennial temptation which Niebuhr defines as 'the worship of one god who is however the god of an ingroup rather than the ground of all being'.<sup>517</sup> It would be a poor God who was only responsible for the being and well being of some, for since Niebuhr's vision is that of the One God whose cause is that of 'universal creation and universal redemption', then anything less than this 'divine cause' is at least questionable, and at worst destructively divisive. 'I see our human religion now, whether non-Christian or Christian, as one part of our human culture which like other parts is subject to a constant process of reformation and deformation, of *metanoia* (repentance) and fall. And in that process the

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<sup>516</sup> Ibid., p. 249. Italics added to original for emphasis.

<sup>517</sup> Ibid., p. 250.

deification of the principles of religious society is no less dangerous to men, no less misleading to their faith, than the deification of national or economic principles.<sup>518</sup>

Radical monotheism, as Niebuhr interprets and articulates it, thus offers a critique, most wholesomely done, perhaps, as self-critique, which each and any religion that aspires to be monotheistic, may put to use in finding evidence of any element of henotheism therein. But this is only the obverse of its 'universal intent', that constructive ecumenical faith-stance whereby God is acknowledged as the one trustworthy value centre who calls human beings to participate in the divine mission of universal reconciliation and redemption as their supremely worthwhile common cause.<sup>519</sup> On this reasoning, any form of Judaism, or Christianity, or Islam that is not loyal to the divine intent, which is to be interpreted as universally beneficent and responsible, is a betrayal or denial of God's reconciling and redeeming work in creation. Yet the way in which this universal mission is to be carried out is by means of the interpersonal interactions of human faith, that is, trust in and loyalty to, the one God who enables such an ethos to prevail at all.

There is clearly, then, a pressing need for each of the three 'official' monotheisms, to review and repent of, whatever elements of henotheism have done or still do lurk within their own distinct communities. Niebuhr's radical monotheism, it would appear, offers a resource that could provide a relatively unthreatening means of finding some degree of mutual benefit for these so-called 'religions'. Though offered by Niebuhr as an interpretation of what the revelation of God through the mediation of Jesus involves or implies, it does not seek to coerce, conquer or subsume the other monotheisms by some prior claim to the supposed superiority of Christianity. Rather, and crucially, it offers a viable and plausible means whereby a principle of, at least convergence, and maybe even reconciliation, having both critical and constructive elements, is brought to light as a helpful or healing resource. The cross of Jesus has often been viewed by Jews and Muslims with deep suspicion, and when one

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<sup>518</sup> Ibid.

<sup>519</sup> We will examine this further in section 2 of chapter 6.



considers the often savage history of the Crusades and the Holocaust, not without good reason; but with the logic of Niebuhr's interpretive principle of radical monotheism, that same cross might also, and better, be seen, as the sign and seal of God's suffering love to reconcile and redeem.<sup>520</sup>

### 3. Moving Beyond Sectarianism: A Northern Ireland Test Case

The context in which I live, minister and write is that of Northern Ireland, which, at the beginning of this third millennium, is still trying to come to terms with, and emerge from, a violent and divisive past. There are, of course, many other places where civil unrest and local or international conflict have been, or still are, scourges upon the lives of thousands and millions of people. However, Northern Ireland has been particularly blighted by a phenomenon known as 'sectarianism' where rival communities strive for supremacy over the same contested space, and where historically, religion and politics have been combined to form a particularly virulent type of social 'disease.' The fact that nationalist and republican aspirations for a united Ireland have been predominantly associated with Roman Catholicism, whereas the desire for most Protestants to adhere to their historic British identity as members of the United Kingdom, whether expressed in unionist or loyalist terms, has deepened these potential or real divisions.<sup>521</sup> The further tragedy, of course, is that, in popular

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<sup>520</sup> For more on the important subject of 'inter-faith' dialogue and relations, we mention here only a few out of a vast array of material, for example, John Hick and Paul E. Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, London, SCM, 1988; Gavin D'Costa, ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1998; David Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative: A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter*, London, SCM, 1988; J.A. DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective*, Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 1992; Ian Markham, 'Christianity and Other Religions,' in Gareth Jones, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*, Oxford, Blackwell, pp. 405-417. A detailed analysis of Niebuhr's work in relation to the now well-known classifications of 'pluralism,' 'inclusivism' and 'exclusivism' would take us well beyond the scope of this thesis, but he is clearly an intriguingly distinct case who would not fit easily into such classifications.

<sup>521</sup> Among a plethora of relevant literature see Jonathan Bardon, *A History of Ulster*, Belfast, The Blackstaff Press, 1992; J. Bowyer Bell, *The Irish Troubles: A Generation of Violence 1967-1992*, Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 1994; Joseph Liechty, *Roots of Sectarianism in Ireland: Chronology and Reflections*, Belfast: Inter-Church Meeting, 1993.

perception, if not always in actual fact, this divisive history has been between two groups of so-called 'Christians', thus bringing their respective church traditions into disrepute for many, and allowing many others to, in effect, confirm their already lightly or firmly held conviction, that something called 'faith' or 'religion' or 'Christianity' is the cause of more trouble, hatred and conflict than its worth. The cause of the truth of the gospel and the reality of God's reconciling and redemptive work have thus been variously condemned or questioned or, at the very least, compromised by the sectarian symptoms allegedly found in that part of the body politic called the Church or 'the churches'.

In their recently completed six-year research project into the phenomenon of sectarianism in Northern Ireland, Joseph Liechty and Cecilia Clegg have offered an analysis that is unprecedented in its depth, subtlety and scope.<sup>522</sup> Their book is the result of an extensive process of research, consultation, practical fieldwork, analysis and multi-disciplinary reflection, part of which I was involved in myself, both personally, and also representatively, as the ordained minister of a local congregation, working in conjunction with other nearby parishes, Catholic and Protestant. In the course of the project, Liechty and Clegg challenge and subvert some of the more widely held stereotypes since 'much thinking about sectarianism is faulty because we take a solely personal approach to a problem that is both personal and systemic.'<sup>523</sup> The complex nature of this difficult and disturbing phenomenon becomes apparent in the following working definition that they present below:

*Sectarianism . . .*

*. . . is a system of attitudes, actions, beliefs, and structures*

- at personal, communal, and institutional levels
- which always involves religion, and typically involves a negative mixing of religion and politics

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<sup>522</sup> Joseph Liechty and Cecilia Clegg, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Identity and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*, Dublin, The Columbia Press, 2001.

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

*... which arises as a distorted expression of positive, human needs especially for belonging, identity, and the free expression of difference*

*... and is expressed in destructive patterns of relating:*

- hardening the boundaries between groups
- overlooking others
- belittling, dehumanising, or demonising others
- justifying or collaborating in the domination of others
- physically or verbally intimidating or attacking others.<sup>524</sup>

Liechty and Clegg identify three possible approaches to the phenomenon thus defined. The first of these is what they call 'non-sectarianism' in which, typically, sectarianism is seen as wrong but where people basically try to avoid dealing with either its root causes or destructive symptoms, thus ceding ground even further to the negative dynamics of the sectarian system. The second approach is what they call 'anti-sectarianism' where people typically name, confront, engage and attack sectarianism but, ironically, in so doing, both fail to acknowledge their own complicity in the phenomenon, and also, use language and strategies which are uncomfortably and self-righteously similar to the very thing which they are opposed to in principle. The third and favoured approach is what our authors call 'moving-beyond-sectarianism' or MBS for short. 'We share with anti-sectarianism the inclination to name and confront sectarianism, but observing that no one is entirely innocent in relation to sectarianism, and that sectarianism is generally a distortion of something good, we reject the strategy of destroying or smashing sectarianism; these risk destroying what is good along with its distortion. We opt instead for an approach characterised by strategies of transforming, redeeming, healing, and converting sectarian distortions.'<sup>525</sup>

Their claim is not that this third way is perfect, or even necessarily superior, for doubtless it contains, or will prove to have, possible or real weaknesses, and

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<sup>524</sup> Ibid., pp. 102-103.

<sup>525</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

for this reason they therefore suggest that ‘the moving-beyond-sectarianism approach is probably better seen as a complement to non- and anti-sectarianism rather than as a replacement. Non-sectarianism relies essentially on the merits of good manners and a basic civility, and if they are limited in what they can accomplish, they are not to be despised; sometimes just getting on with things rather than tackling them head on is entirely appropriate. As for anti-sectarianism, its forthrightness and vigour will often be necessary traits. Understood as a complement, however, the moving-beyond-sectarianism approach does offer some new insights and strategies for dealing with sectarianism.’<sup>526</sup>

On the last page of their study, Liechty and Clegg, among many other suggestions and strategies, call for the development of ‘a theology of reconciliation based on the experiences and needs of the churches and faith communities in Northern Ireland – perhaps one or more of the theological colleges commissioning such a piece of research.’<sup>527</sup> In their MBS book, the authors named above, though too modest to say so, have, in fact, gone some way towards providing such a theology of reconciliation, but nonetheless, there is still a considerable, and crucial task, yet to be undertaken in this field. Whilst it is beyond the scope of my thesis to attempt or articulate such an ambitious project, the modest hope that I have for this current section of my dissertation is that some central Niebuhrian insights can be seen to illuminate and inform the analysis and potential transformation of the phenomenon of sectarianism as outlined above. In doing so, it might go some small way to meeting the call for the development of a Northern Irish theology of reconciliation, as well as providing contextual evidence of the fruitfulness and effectiveness of Niebuhr’s *theologia crucis*.

In a summary statement Niebuhr proposes that ‘[r]evelation is not the development and not the elimination of our natural religion; it is the revolution of the religious life.’<sup>528</sup> Likewise, he argues that ‘[r]evelation is not a

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<sup>526</sup> Ibid.

<sup>527</sup> Ibid., p. 346.

<sup>528</sup> HRN, *The Meaning of Revelation*, London, Collier Macmillan, 1960, p. 138.

development of our religious ideas but their continuous conversion. God's self-disclosure is that permanent revolution in our religious life by which all religious truths are painfully transformed and all religious behavior transfigured by repentance and new faith.<sup>529</sup> These affirmations are consistent with the central thrust of Niebuhr's theology as we have been presenting it throughout this thesis. Radical monotheism is that faith-stance or faith-type that involves a thorough reassessment of our previously held beliefs and behaviour. In particular, and with specific reference to sectarianism, it involves a repentance or conversion or transformation of our henotheism, in which we trusted in some finite value centre and gave loyalty to its social but limited common cause, thereby excluding some others from the 'in-group' or 'closed society' so defined by this type of faith. One only has to briefly pause to consider the bitter and mutually exclusive histories of loyalism and republicanism, or, in their milder forms of unionism or nationalism, to feel the weight of a Niebuhrian analysis of the fallenness of such henotheisms or destructive ideologies, as well as their potential transformation by the radical monotheism that he articulates and advances.

Niebuhr's work on radical monotheism (HRN) thus has interesting affinities with that of Liechty and Clegg (MBS) in which instructive and persuasive insights seem to mesh together in helpful ways so that the promise of each is, in some ways, reinforced and enhanced. Some of their commonalities may be presented here briefly without seeking to override or dismiss their distinctive approaches. First, we might note that both HRN and MBS consider their respective projects as a complement to existing approaches or methodologies in the fields in which they work.<sup>530</sup> Neither feels compelled to aggressively assert that theirs is the only or supreme approach, partly, perhaps, because to begin with strident dogmatism is to bring yet one more factor into an already charged and contested context. Sensitivity but not apology seems to characterise their similar strategic approaches. Second, both HRN and MBS see henotheism and sectarianism respectively as natural but distorted examples of what is

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<sup>529</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>530</sup> HRN, *Christ and Culture*, p.190; *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, p.5; *The Responsible Self*, pp. 67-68; *Faith on Earth*, p. 102; Liechty and Clegg, *MBS*, p. 26.

essentially good and desirable. HRN describes this in terms of the faithlessness of the social self whereby people trust in a false value centre, expressing this in misdirected loyalty to the cause of this socially finite in-group. The resulting henotheism, be it based on colour, class, creed or other social ideology is basically an idolatrous breaking of the first and second commandments from the Old Testament Decalogue and the Great Commandment of Jesus. MBS describes this in terms of the human search for identity and belonging, these being the natural phenomena which are embodied, expressed and nurtured within the particular context in which people live. Sectarianism occurs whenever our sense of identity and belonging are predicated upon narrowly exclusive and defensive self-understandings, with the consequential destructive patterns of relating to others that are associated with the ethos of the community in question. Third, both HRN and MBS see the Christian gospel as providing both the needed dynamic for repentance of past or existing false faith or idolatry, and also the means to undergo a painful but perfectly possible process of change, one which may be variously called transformation, conversion, redemption or reconciliation. HRN and MBS thus indicate, through their distinctive, but I believe, convergent approaches, that human idolatry in henotheistic or sectarian form can both be understood with clarity and empathy, yet also become the object of God's redemptive and reconciling action in Jesus Christ, a transformation of our existential predicament by the evangelical and ecumenical realities of his crucifixion, resurrection and ascended intercession. Thus we may speak once more of *crucial* faith, with its double meaning: faith's *necessary* conversion from its false manifestations, and this, fundamentally because of the ongoing work of the *crucified*, yet risen and reigning Christ, so that faith may be redirected and enlarged, enabling even 'outsiders' and former 'enemies' to be included and reintegrated into our horizon of concern, acceptance and mutual care.

#### 4. A Larger Ecumenism: The Ecology of Radical Responsibility

The fourth and final aspect of this chapter now involves a consideration of the widest and most comprehensive meaning of the term 'ecumenical'. As was noted at the beginning of the current chapter, the Greek word *oikoumene* is perhaps best translated as 'the whole inhabited earth' or 'the one household of life', and as such, therefore, calls us to contemplate the place of humanity in terms of its interaction with the complex and diverse dynamics of what is variously called the 'environment' or the entire surrounding natural order. Recent literature has begun to notice, or rediscover, the significant and subtle nuances conveyed by the Greek root *oikos*, implying, as it does, a deep and intimate connection between such branches of life and study as 'ecology' and 'economics' in the one *oikoumene* or 'household of life' as given and sustained by God.<sup>531</sup> In the officially ecumenical circles of the World Council of Churches this has been part of its own search for 'a vital and coherent theology' in the newly appreciated context of 'globalisation', the dynamics of which can no longer be denied, and which thus urges upon us all, but especially those of us in the 'richer North and West' of the world, to consider how to live more responsibly and less rapaciously.<sup>532</sup>

Niebuhr died in 1962, some years before this 'paradigm shift' to a new global awareness had become a matter of grave and widespread concern. Like most of his forebears and contemporaries in the fields of theology and ethics, his primary points of emphasis were on divine-human and human-human relationships. For instance when he states that 'the complex object of theological study always has the three aspects of God in relation to man, of men

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<sup>531</sup> Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition*, Geneva, WCC, 1996, esp. pp. 79-111.

<sup>532</sup> Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, *Redeeming the Creation, the Rio Earth Summit: Challenge to the Churches*, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1992; David Hallman, ed., *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1994. Both of these have been part of the WCC's recent project entitled: 'Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation'. See also Douglas John Hall, *The Stewardship of Life in the Kingdom of Death*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1985; *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1986; *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1990; Dieter T. Hessel, ed., *Theology for Earth Community: A Field Guide*, New York, Orbis Books, 1996; Dieter Hessel and Larry Rasmussen, eds., *Earth Habitat: Eco-Injustice and the Church's Response*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2001.

in relation to God, and of men-before-God in relation to each other' we may take this as a typical example of where his convictions and interests mainly lay.<sup>533</sup> Yet in the same book, and elsewhere within his writings, there are hints and traces of a much more comprehensive setting for life. The human drama, fascinating though it is, takes place on a global or universal stage in which the enviroing creation is the object of God's good intent and is therefore not to be neglected, exploited or abused.<sup>534</sup> In answer to his echoing of the rhetorical question, 'And who is my neighbour?' put to Jesus by an earlier enquirer, Niebuhr demonstrates his ecumenical sensibility as follows: 'He is Augustine in the Roman Catholic Church and Socrates in Athens, and the Russian people, and the unborn generations who will bear the consequences of our failures, *future persons for whom we are administering the entrusted wealth of nature and other greater common gifts. He is man and he is angel and he is animal and inorganic being, all that participates in being.*'<sup>535</sup>

Niebuhr does not develop the details implicit in this universal vision of the global context within which human beings live. Nonetheless, his instinct for, and articulation of, the logic inherent in that faith-stance or ethos which he calls 'radical monotheism' and its corollary 'responsibility', mitigates against the perennial tendency of theology and ethics to pay too much or almost exclusive attention to 'humankind' at the expense of what might be called 'other-kind'. The biblical affirmation is that God's concern is for *all* creation, and that *anthropos*, whilst indeed the object of God's loving will, cannot live aright without some genuine appreciation of its proper relation to the entire enviroing *kosmos* that is also cherished and sustained by God. Writing in 1960, Niebuhr could say that the 'so-called underdeveloped nations – including Russia – do not yet know that there is no hope and no glory and no joy in the multiplication of our powers over nature, and we have no way of saving them from going through the experience which we have passed or are passing.'<sup>536</sup>

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<sup>533</sup> HRN, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, op. cit., p. 125.

<sup>534</sup> David, G. Trickett, 'Toward a Christian Theology of Nature: A Study Based on the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr,' Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Methodist University, 1982.

<sup>535</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38. Italics added for emphasis.

<sup>536</sup> HRN, 'Reformation: Continuing Imperative,' op. cit., p. 250.



As has been noted earlier in this thesis, Niebuhr, though concerned primarily with the faith dynamics of the social self, nonetheless seeks to place his anthropology into a greater context than simply human community per se. Indeed, he considers humanism, to be a form of henotheism, in that, although an improvement on such narrow and destructive ideologies as sectarianism, nationalism or fascism, it still falls short of the truly universal intent that is inherent in radical monotheism. 'Genuinely radical monotheism has included all that humanism includes and something more. It has affirmed not only all mankind but all being. It has involved men not only in battle against the wrongs that afflict men but set them into conflict with what is destructive and anarchic in all accessible realms of being. Its religion has found holiness in man, but also in all nature and in what is beyond nature. It has believed in the salvation of men from evil, but also in the liberation of the whole groaning and travailing creation. Its science has sought to understand men, yet for it the proper study of mankind has been not only man but the infinitely great and the infinitely small in the whole realm of being. Its art has reinterpreted man to himself but has also re-created for man and reinterpreted to him natural beings and eternal forms that have become for him objects of wonder and surprise.'<sup>537</sup>

Niebuhr's vision of the *oikumene* is, as the above quotes show, attractive and suggestive, but for all that, impressionistic in style and rather scant in detail. In one sense, he shows a prophetic eye for important issues just beginning to show on the horizon, but given the other urgent matters that he felt called to attend to in the main decades of his life, his interest in what we are here calling the 'ecology' of radical responsibility, remained at the level of an artistic or architectural sketch. Since then, of course, a complex mix of ecological, environmental, economic and ethical issues have come more to the fore, and increasingly, would appear to be forcing their way up the agendas of many peoples, communities and governments. One contemporary writer puts it thus:

"The environmental crisis" does not adequately describe what ails us. "Environment" means that which surrounds us. It is a world separate from ourselves, outside us. The true state of affairs, however, is far more interesting and intimate. The world around us

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<sup>537</sup> HRN, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, op. cit., p. 89.

is also within. We are an expression of it; it is an expression of us. We are made of it; we eat, drink and breathe it. And someday, when dying day comes, we will each return the favor and begin our role as a long, slow meal for millions of little critters. Earth is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. This is not “environment” so much as the holy mystery of creation, made for and by all earth’s creatures together.<sup>538</sup>

Rasmussen, whose reflections these are, asks us to follow him in a fresh ‘consideration of earth’s agonies. Thriving, even surviving, now lives with a terrifying insight. Earth – all of it – is a community without an exit. Our problems – people-to-people and humankind-to-otherkind – are genuinely ours all together, for worse and for better. The key terms in this text – “sustainability,” “earth faith,” “earth ethics,” “the integrity of creation” – all assume that the [presently bordered countries of the world] are no longer truly bordered at all. Acid rain falls on the just and unjust alike. “Armed struggles for profit” leave “collars of waste” upon earth’s shores and “currents of debris” upon her breast, without worrying over passports and fences. The world, all of it, has become game and booty and landfill.’<sup>539</sup> In short, as Daniel Maguire puts it, in a quote that stresses the urgency and gravity of the suffocating stranglehold that the ‘more developed’ peoples of the world have put on all of earth’s community in what is now widely labelled ‘globalisation’: ‘If current trends continue, we will not. And that is qualitatively and epochally true. If religion does not speak to [this], it is an obsolete distraction.’<sup>540</sup>

Rasmussen sets out to try and answer this challenge, describing his book as a ‘work in religious ethics. It argues for a dedication to earth in the manner of the sacred and sacramental and couples this with a sense of wonder that is protective of all life. Too, the moral yield drawn upon is religiously rooted and watered. These pages move within the open circle of ethical monotheism. That means Judaism and Christianity principally. But other traditions sing as

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<sup>538</sup> Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1996, p. xii. It would be hard to overestimate the importance and prescience of Rasmussen’s brilliant and multi-faceted book which was awarded the prestigious 1997 Grawemeyer Award for the best religious book for the preceding year.

<sup>539</sup> *Ibid.* The quoted phrases are from Maya Angelou’s poem, ‘On the Pulse of Morning’.

<sup>540</sup> Daniel Maguire, *The Moral Core of Judaism and Christianity: Reclaiming the Revolution*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993, p. 13. Quoted by Rasmussen, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

well.<sup>541</sup> He further argues therefore that '[w]hat makes for sustainability – social, environmental, spiritual and moral sustainability – becomes the question. The answer will entail proposals both innovative and realistic. Such proposals themselves will, if they would see the light of day, require the imagination and tenacity characteristic of religious energy and devotion.'<sup>542</sup>

The point of particular relevance to this thesis is that one of the major theologians on whom Rasmussen bases the subsequent unfolding of his work is H. Richard Niebuhr, whose radical monotheism, almost provides, one might say, the theological and ethical underpinning for the argument that follows. The deep resonance with Niebuhr's earlier, if rather undeveloped, reflections about the appropriate ethos that it is desirable, even necessary, for us to nurture as we face the *crucial interdependencies* of our shared ecumenical future, is made powerfully clear in this extensive passage from Rasmussen:

Jesus the Jew, in whom Christians see the fullest manifestation of God possible in human form, radicalises the notion of neighbor. He insists that the enemy is neighbor and that we are to treat all neighbors, including the enemy, with a regard equal to the regard we accord ourselves in love. We are to use the same framework of positive reference when we consider others as we use for ourselves. This is by now so much the pedestrian repetition of moral catechism that we hardly expect anything explosive, or even relevant, from it.

But consider what happens when neighbor-love is extended in ways illumined by "creation" and "justice" and implied by an ethic of living sustainably in a contracting and crowded world. Then neighbor embraces, as H. Richard Niebuhr argued, "all that participates in being," organic and inorganic, present, past, and future. Neighbor then means a comprehensive responsibility inherited from the ancestors and turned toward posterity. In this sense, neighbourly responsibility is infinite in extent, with no preordained boundaries. Neighbor means being entrusted with the wealth of nature and the treasures of society for the sake of plant, human, and other animal life alike. It means responsibility for what neighbor literally means – the nigh farmer or, more loosely, the nigh one. But it means accountability to the far one as well, both in time

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<sup>541</sup> Rasmussen, *op. cit.*, pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>542</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

and space. And it means welfare for the enemy as well as for those for whom we willingly sacrifice. As in the parable of the Good Samaritan, class, social standing, function in society, address, and purity rules of all kinds have nothing to do with the definition of neighbor. Neighbor is as neighbor-love does to whomever or whatever is at hand and in need. In a word, the neighbor in a million guises is the articulated form of creation to whom justice, as the fullest possible flourishing of creation, is due.<sup>543</sup>

Niebuhr can rightly be said to have anticipated this ecumenical sensibility or ecological loyalty as far back as mid twentieth century when he articulated his vision of radical monotheism and the ethics associated with it as ‘the affirmation of a universe and the devoted will to maintain universal community at whatever cost to the self. It is the patriotism of the universal commonwealth, the kingdom of god, as a commonwealth of justice and love, the reality of which is sure to become evident.’<sup>544</sup> But, as Niebuhr knows, given his realistic reading of human nature and its fallen condition, the ‘moral consequences of sin – man’s inhumanity to man, *cruelty to beasts, exploitation of nature*, abuse of sex, *greed, commercial profanation of creation and its beauty* – these are no less patent.’<sup>545</sup>

Niebuhr, as we have seen throughout this study, was always finely attuned to the misery that people brought upon themselves by their various ideologies and associated practices. His own judgement was that ‘the deification of the principles of religious society is no less dangerous’ to them ‘than the deification of national and economic principles.’ He was thus at an early stage in his life’s work, and continually thereafter, concerned ‘to protest against the spirit of capitalism and of nationalism, of communism and technological civilization’ each of which in their own way, contrived to exploit, abuse and otherwise destroy the finely-balanced and radically interdependent relations and processes of the good creation that God has entrusted into our care. The sheer scale of

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<sup>543</sup> Ibid., pp. 260-261. The HRN quote therein is from *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, p. 38. See also the essay by Rasmussen in the section of essays devoted to the ‘neighborology’ of Kosuke Koyama in a festschrift dedicated to him, namely Dale T. Irvin and Akintunde E. Akinade, eds., *The Agitated Mind of God: The Theology of Kosuke Koyama*, ‘Oikos and Cross’, New York, Orbis, 1996, pp. 212-224.

<sup>544</sup> HRN, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>545</sup> HRN, ‘Man the Sinner,’ op. cit., p. 279. Italics added to emphasise Niebuhr’s ecologically ecumenical sensibility.

misery that this irresponsible faithlessness visited upon the 'poor' was the worst consequence of this, but not to be denied either, was the 'trivialization' and 'emptiness' that many people in the more 'developed' countries of the world experienced as a result of 'living in a great religious void',<sup>546</sup> as well as the long-term effects of environmental damage and ecological destruction, with perhaps untold danger and diminishment for all of earth and its inhabitants.

But such uneasy forebodings were not all that Niebuhr contributes to this issue. In fact, his critique and warnings were based upon an affirmation of, and appreciation for, the 'radical responsibility' that Jesus Christ enacted and mediates. 'Will of God is present for Jesus in every event from the death of sparrows, the shining of sun and descent of rain' these latter being 'signs of cosmic generosity. The response to the weather so interpreted leads then also to a response to criminals and outcasts, who have not been cast out by the infinite Lord. So it is also with carefree birds who deserve no pay for useful work, and with flowers that have done no heroic deeds to merit their colourful ribbons and brilliant medals.' Can one not say, asks Niebuhr, that these are 'signs of the presence of an overflowing creativity, of an infinite artistry, that rejoices in its creations, that rejects, because it is all grace, the censorship of human laws, not because it falls below the common human standard, but rises far above it?'<sup>547</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

The various aspects of Niebuhr's *ecumenical* work have thus been explored. It is evident that there is a consistently 'catholic', or 'inclusive' or 'universal' logic inherent in his theology of *radical monotheism*, upon which his ethics of

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<sup>546</sup> HRN, 'Reformation: Continuing Imperative,' op. cit., p. 250.

<sup>547</sup> HRN, *The Responsible Self*, op. cit., pp. 164-166. We thus reconnect with the various aspects of Niebuhr's Yale Divinity School *Christian Ethics Lectures*, op. cit., on 'Response to the Creative Action of God' as analysed in Chapter Three, Section 4 of this thesis. A re-reading of that material in the light of this current environmental or ecological section should now be more instructive and illuminating.

*responsibility* were based and developed, a perspective which we have here chosen to designate as 'ecumenical'.

This ecumenical dimension of Niebuhr's work has been analysed in terms of four distinct aspects. First, we saw how he initially worked hard at forming various denominational church-unions so that the structural oneness of the Church could be further embodied. However, over time, his pursuit of this goal waned, and he invested more of his hopes and efforts in the more underlying and less formal ministry of seeking to lay bear, or contribute to, a deeper, more subtle ecumenical reality in which the One Church would converge upon Jesus Christ as the incarnation and mediator of radical monotheism. Secondly, we suggested that this Niebuhrian understanding of faith might yet be a possible resource to help reconcile the world's three 'official' monotheisms: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The 'crucified mind' of radical monotheism's *theologia crucis* provides promising possibilities for each faith tradition to engage in self-critique and searching dialogue, and so lessen the potential for mutual ignorance to either sow the seeds of suspicion, or fuel further animosity and conflict. Thirdly, we observed the remarkable parallels between Niebuhr's theology and the recent *Moving Beyond Sectarianism Project*, demonstrating, I believe, the mutual compatibility between their key insights, and therefore confirming my hunch that Niebuhr's work on 'henotheism' is a penetrating analysis of the phenomenon of sectarianism. Finally, we followed the implicitly ecological or environmental orientation of Niebuhr's corpus, and found that some of his core concepts are remarkably congruent with the burgeoning writings of some of the leading practitioners in this field, and who, indebted to the logic of his work, have developed it much further in addressing the increasingly urgent needs of our contemporary context.

## Chapter Six: An Eschatological Perspective

### 1. The Coming of Jesus Christ

Theology has traditionally thought of eschatology as the doctrine of the last things (from the Greek word *eschata* meaning ‘the last things’). This has tended to mean an interpretation of such subjects as resurrection, judgement, the destiny of the human being, heaven and hell, and the nature of eternal life. These have arguably been areas which have been badly abused, not least in that they have given rise to much unwarranted speculation, tending, thereby, to either become overly sentimental, or, at the other extreme, giving rise to many forms of destructive and demeaning scare-mongering.<sup>548</sup>

One of the noteworthy features of Christian theology, or at least mainstream Christian theology in recent decades, is that eschatology has been rescued somewhat from the unfortunate tendencies of both extremism and isolationism. By extremism, we mean the excesses of sentimentalism and scare-mongering as mentioned above. By isolationism, we mean that eschatology is less likely than in previous eras to be relegated to the status of a few appended thoughts about the end-times, normally depicted in terms of eternal life considered in relative abstraction from everyday historical life. In contrast to these misguided tendencies, recent theologians place much more emphasis on integrating eschatology into the overall framework of theology, and the particular doctrinal loci therein. The overall effect of this is that these other doctrines, whether Christology, anthropology, ecclesiology, ethics or whatever, now have a distinctly eschatological content or ‘colouring’.<sup>549</sup>

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<sup>548</sup> See, for example, Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, London, Marshall Pickering, 1971.

<sup>549</sup> See David Fergusson, ‘Eschatology’ in Colin Gunton, editor, *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 226-244; Carl Braaten, ‘The Kingdom of God and the Life Everlasting’, in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks*, London, SPCK, 1983, pp. 274-298; Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch, London, SCM Press, 1967; *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl, London,

It can, of course, be said that every theologian has an eschatology of some sort given that the subject matter of faith in the living God revealed in Jesus gives rise to Christian hope, however that latter term be understood. But in this doctrinal area in particular, much depends upon the relative weight of emphasis placed upon the internal dynamics in question. It is to such an analysis of Niebuhr's understanding of eschatology that we now turn, though it may be noted at the outset, as we have found in other areas of his thought, that his references to, and reflections upon, this subject will need to be brought to a more systematically explicit focus than was the case in his own writings. It should also be noted that this chapter will be somewhat shorter than the earlier ones, given that we have by now performed an exposition of most of the main lines of Niebuhr's thought, thus already touching upon and anticipating, though implicitly, much of his *eschatologia crucis*.<sup>550</sup>

Both the Niebuhr brothers, Reinhold and Richard (HRN), have often been accused by their critics of being unduly pessimistic in their interpretations of history.<sup>551</sup> Like any hasty or dismissive judgement, it arguably does not do justice to the nuances and complexities of a possible alternative assessment. What the accusation does allow us to do, however, is to begin to analyse HRN's eschatology by means of the way in which he carefully distinguishes it from that of his brother Reinhold. In a paper prepared for 'The Theological Discussion Group' in 1949, Niebuhr expressed his appreciation for his brother's writings but noted that one of the perplexing things about them was that Reinhold's genuinely held Christian beliefs remained largely hidden from view when he attempted to interpret the often troubled or even tragic arena of history. In terms of what was known as his 'Christian realism', Reinhold seemed to make his political realism more explicit and prominent than his Christian

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SCM Press, 1996; Hans Schwarz, *Eschatology*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2000; and especially the unjustly neglected Adrio Konig, *The Eclipse of Christ in Eschatology: Toward a Christ-Centered Approach*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1989.

<sup>550</sup> The phrase is used in Douglas John Hall, *Confessing the Faith: Volume 1. Christian Theology in a North American Context*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1998. p.29.

<sup>551</sup> John D. Barbour, 'Niebuhr versus Niebuhr: The Tragic Nature of History,' op. cit.



faith.<sup>552</sup> Referring to this tendency in his brother's viewpoint, Niebuhr writes that it is 'pre-Christian eschatology in the sense that the emphasis falls on the two ideas that sin and the "demonic" powers now reign and that only in the "end" will there be fulfilment. It is Christian eschatology in the sense that the first coming of Christ has judged man and the powers so that in faith it is now known that they do not have any final dominion and that God will make his justice, love, and mercy manifest in the end. It is Christian eschatology in the sense that the time of the interval is the time of repentance and faith made possible by the coming of Jesus Christ into the flesh.'<sup>553</sup>

Niebuhr continues his analysis, in the process giving us fairly strong clues as to what his own perspective is, in relation to, yet distinct from, his brother's. He writes:

Something is implicit here that is not made explicit and which if it were made more explicit would, I think, somewhat change the emphasis. What seems to be said is that the cross as judgment stands in the very midst of our history, though as forgiveness it stands at the end of history so that man in history can live in repentance and in the hope of forgiveness. But the resurrection does not explicitly stand in history, though the faith which is now in history according to Reinie presupposes the resurrection. It seems to me important that all the references to Jesus Christ as having come are references to the crucified Christ, to "suffering love" which must "remain suffering love in history" and that there are so few references to "triumphant faith" – not necessarily the triumphant faith of the Christian but of Jesus Christ.<sup>554</sup>

Niebuhr, as we have seen throughout this thesis, has a strong affinity with just such an interpretation. Indeed, we have been arguing that his is an existentially-informed *theologia crucis* which takes with the utmost seriousness the passion of Jesus Christ, as both an event uniquely undergone by him, yet also a perpetual and perennial process, in which a suffering humanity also participates by incorporation into his being-in-act.<sup>555</sup> However, important and,

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<sup>552</sup> HRN, 'Reinhold Niebuhr's Interpretation of History' in *Theology, History and Culture*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1996, pp. 91-101, esp. 97-98.

<sup>553</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>554</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>555</sup> See, for instance, HRN, 'Participation in the Present Passion,' *op.cit.*

indeed, pervasive as this theme is in Niebuhr's work, there is clearly also another related aspect, and that is that the faithfulness of Jesus is vindicated by his resurrection by God the Father so demonstrating that God in Christ is the basis of an ultimately victorious gospel in which humans can, do and will share. Niebuhr's interpretation does indeed often accentuate the crucifying aspects of the gospel of the Christ-event, but whilst the notes of celebration and triumph are not so often sounded, they are a real, though mostly subdued or implicit part of his rendering of the good news of grace. Hence, in pursuing his perceptive analysis of his brother's eschatology, and thus paving the way for his own distinct nuances, Niebuhr spells out what is 'near the center' of his difficulties with, and differences from, Reinhold's stance as follows:

Jesus, he says, reinterprets the "eschata." Jesus attributed the qualities of the suffering servant to his first coming and the qualities of the triumphant Son of Man to a second coming. Hence Reinie makes history between the first and second comings an interim in which love continues to suffer but in which men partly know the true meaning of history and so live in faith and repentance. *But it seems to me that the Christian reinterpretation of the "eschata" must be distinguished from Jesus' reinterpretation, that the resurrection means that Christ has come again and come with power, that the interval between the first and second comings was very short and that the interval in which men now live is not between crucifixion and resurrection but between the resurrection of the first fruits and the final resurrection.*<sup>556</sup>

This is probably the most explicit and important eschatological statement about the coming of Jesus Christ to be found in Niebuhr's entire corpus. It is also remarkably similar to that of Karl Barth, whose own eschatology has often been the subject of criticism. William Stacy Johnson, in a recent reinterpretation, has drawn attention to the way in which Barth articulates the Parousia, namely, the final coming of Christ as having the 'threefold form of Resurrection, Pentecost, and Second Coming'.<sup>557</sup> Granted that Niebuhr's terminology is somewhat different in that he calls the incarnation the first form of Christ's coming and the resurrection of the crucified Jesus the second,

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<sup>556</sup> HRN, Reinhold Niebuhr's Interpretation of History, p. 98. Italics mine for emphasis.

<sup>557</sup> William Stacy Johnson, *The Mystery of God: Karl Barth and the Postmodern Foundations of Theology*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997, p. 124.

whereas Barth prefers the terminology given above; nonetheless, the meaning and emphasis of both theologians is remarkably similar. Compare, for example, the following reflections on eschatology from each in turn. First, Niebuhr, who writes:

The divine rule, the divine action in all things, which now men only dimly perceive and understand in their encounter with creative and destructive events, will be clearly revealed at last, in the end. What is to become clear in the end, however, is not something new. It is now an emergency that is coming. The actuality of the present is to become emergent. God whose rule is hidden and whose rule will become manifest is ruling now, despite all hiddenness. Realized eschatology is realized theology.<sup>558</sup>

In remarkably similar fashion, Barth offers the following reflections in response to questions about the meaning of eschatology:

'I can only give an indication: the "old" and the "new" worlds are indirectly identical, the new already present in the old in that its reconciliation in Jesus Christ has already taken place. What is still to come is its manifestation (i.e. "apocalyptic" eschatology!) – its general, final, universal revelation.' In other words: 'Eternal life is not another, second life beyond our present one, but the reverse side of *this* life, as God sees it, which is hidden from us here and now. It is this life in relationship to what God has done in Jesus Christ for the whole world and thus also for us. So we wait and hope – in respect of our death – to be made *manifest* with him (Jesus Christ who is raised from the dead), in the glory of judgment, and also of the grace of God. That will be the *new* thing: that the veil which now lies over the whole world and thus over our life (tears, death, sorrow, crying, grief) will be taken away, and God's counsel (already accomplished in Jesus Christ) will stand before our eyes, the object of our deepest shame, but also of our joyful thanks and praise.'<sup>559</sup>

Whilst it is not the main purpose of this thesis to conduct a full-blown comparison of Niebuhr and Barth, it has nonetheless been an ongoing

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<sup>558</sup> HRN, *The Responsible Self*, op. cit., p. 167. Note the similarity to Hall's understanding of the eschatological thrust of the *theologia crucis*, in Douglas John Hall, *Lighten our Darkness: Towards an Indigenous Theology of the Cross*, Lima, Ohio, Academic Renewal Press, 2001, p. 145, 'The glory, accessible to those who adhere to the cross, is perceived by faith, not by sight. To quote Luther, it is always hidden under its opposite.'

<sup>559</sup> Quoted in Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His life from letters and autobiographical texts*, SCM Press, trans. John Bowden, London, 1976, p. 488.

subsidiary theme, that we take note of some important points of contrast, or, as I believe more often to be the case, of congruence and convergence, than Niebuhr cared to admit. Here again, we note the similarity of their positions, this time in the area of eschatology. Niebuhr, indeed, having earlier expressed some misgivings about the eschatological aspects of Barth's earlier work, could later find himself affirming that 'I believe that Barth has become the legitimate heir of the Social Gospel by placing its social understanding of life in a context in which it can live.'<sup>560</sup> Niebuhr saw in Barth, similar to his own intellectual pilgrimage, I would argue, someone who realised that the best instincts of the Social Gospel would benefit from being based on a more eschatological rather than teleological depiction in that, in the former, the main emphasis is on 'the Kingdom which *God* establishes, has established, and will establish' specifically as 'revealed, known and believed through God's act of self-communication in Jesus Christ.'<sup>561</sup>

## 2. The Sovereignty of God: An 'Emergent Reality' with 'Universal Intent'

As noted before, 'the fundamental certainty' given to Niebuhr, at least as far back as the 1930's, 'was that of God's sovereignty.'<sup>562</sup> Every other aspect of his work was based upon this: whether it be his existential analysis of faith and its various faithless counterfeit forms; his evangelical description of how God transforms the human situation through the incarnation and mediation of radical monotheism in Jesus Christ; his ethics of 'Christo-morphic' responsibility to God's creative, governing and redemptive actions; his lifelong vocation to contribute to the reformation of the Church's deformities so that it would

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<sup>560</sup> HRN, 'The Kingdom of God and Eschatology in the Social Gospel and in Barthianism,' in HRN, *Theology, History and Culture*, op. cit., p. 122.

<sup>561</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121. For more on how Barth's dialectical theology moved through four distinct, though related historical phases, the first two of which were more eschatological and the last two more Christocentric, see Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997. Niebuhr, in contrast to Barth, could never fully approve of the latter's christological 'objectivism'.

<sup>562</sup> HRN, 'Reformation: Continuing Imperative,' op. cit., p. 248.

participate in Christ's saving mission in a spirituality that sought to overcome the world's many sectarian, suspicious and exploitative tendencies with a more ecumenical orientation. Woven deep into each of these aspects of Niebuhr's work was his distinctive *theologia crucis*, the *crucial faith* that Jesus Christ embodied and mediates to those who thus 'participate in his passion'.

In terms of eschatology, this means that 'Christian action' may be described as 'response to the divine activity which precedes, accompanies and awaits human action in history.'<sup>563</sup> This is Niebuhr on Barth, but it may also be taken to accurately convey Niebuhr's own eschatology too, for seldom elsewhere in his writings does he speak with such specificity about the subject, and nowhere else does he contradict or significantly change his mind. To speak, therefore, of the sovereignty or 'Kingdom of God means that God is pre-temporal, super-temporal, and post-temporal; it means that time is bounded by eternity on every side, but it also means that eternity enters into and conditions time and calls for the response of the temporal at every moment.'<sup>564</sup>

Clearly then, for Niebuhr, as for Barth, the 'temporal is not eternal but eternity is forever ingressing into time. That it is ingressing and what it is in character is known through revelation by the Christian, whose life must consist of response to the eternal rather than a seeking after it, or of an ascetic denial of the temporal.'<sup>565</sup> The term 'ingressing' is synonymous with Nieburian language from earlier in this thesis when, it may be recalled, in debate with his brother Reinhold, he stated that in his, Richard's, more 'eschatological faith', the kingdom of God is an 'emergent' which 'comes inevitably, though whether we see it or not, depends on our recognition of its presence and our acceptance of

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<sup>563</sup> HRN, 'The Kingdom of God and Eschatology in the Social Gospel and in Barthianism,' op. cit., p. 121.

<sup>564</sup> Ibid., pp. 121-122. Note the parallels to Barth's three-fold rendering of God's 'fatherly lordship' especially in his 'preserving, accompanying and ruling' grace in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/3*, op. cit., pp. 3-288; Kathryn Tanner, 'Creation and Providence,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed., John Webster, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 111-126; George Hunsinger, 'Mysterium Trinitatis: Karl Barth's Conception of Eternity,' in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, op. cit., pp. 186-209. It should be noted, though, that Barth is much more thoroughly Trinitarian and Christocentric than Niebuhr, typifying their differing emphases.

<sup>565</sup> HRN, 'The Kingdom of God and Eschatology in the Social Gospel and in Barthianism,' op. cit., p. 122.

the only kind of life which will enable us to enter it, the life of repentance and faith.<sup>566</sup>

But crucial to this Niebuhrian interpretation of God's sovereignty as an eschatological 'emergency' that becomes 'emergent' in and through time is the ecumenical or universal dimension that belongs logically and inescapably to it, as noted earlier in our exposition of 'radical monotheism'. The dense and intricate interweave of these two perspectives, the eschatological and the ecumenical are evident in the following paragraph, one in which many threads are brought together:

The Christian ethos so uniquely exemplified in Christ himself is an ethics of universal responsibility. It interprets every particular event as included in universal action. It is the ethos of citizenship in a universal society, in which no being that exists and no action that takes place is interpretable outside the universal context. It is also the ethos of eternal life, in the sense that no act of man in response to action upon him does not involve repercussions, reactions, extending onward toward infinity in time as well as in social space.<sup>567</sup>

Integral to Niebuhr's understanding of the sovereignty of God is the belief that God is 'inconquerably loving and redeeming', One who as 'purposive person working towards the glorification of his creation and of himself in his works, enlists us 'in his cause, the cause of universal creation and universal redemption.'<sup>568</sup> However, because this is so, 'the promised perfection of the community of faith is both a longed for and a feared consummation.'<sup>569</sup> There is no smooth or painless progress in any *eschatologia crucis* worthy of the name, and in Niebuhr's interpretation, it is especially evident that this is so. The gospel's consummation is 'longed for as the realization of all that is potential in our creation and redemption, as the deliverance from all deceits, lies, treasons, hypocrisies [and other distresses and disappointments] which distort our existence. But it is also feared as that which brings to light and eradicates all

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<sup>566</sup> HRN, 'A Communication: The Only Way into the Kingdom,' op. cit., p. 447.

<sup>567</sup> HRN, *The Responsible Self*, op. cit., p. 167.

<sup>568</sup> HRN, 'Reformation: Continuing Imperative,' op. cit., p. 249.

<sup>569</sup> HRN, *Faith on Earth*, op. cit., p. 111.

that is false in it' and therefore 'includes not only the prospect of infinite effort but of great suffering'.<sup>570</sup>

In the specific terms of Niebuhr's 'pistology', one notes that there may be 'progress in personal relations of faith; trust experiencing loyalty increases: loyalty calls forth loyalty. But such loyalty is accompanied by the dark shadow of treason. The more extensive the community of loyalty, the more extensive in its effects will be the act of treason which breaks that loyalty. The more men trust in one another's loyalty the greater the temptation to deceit or to hypocrisy. Great vices are possible only where there are great virtues, since vice always feeds on virtue. Hence the possibility of the anti-Christ always appears in the future of the community of faith, while its progress is marked by the appearance of deceits and treasons that are the counterparts of its faith.'<sup>571</sup> The recurrent word throughout Niebuhr's reflections here in *Faith on Earth* is *restoration*: the saving grace of the sovereign God made known in Jesus Christ restores, or works toward the consummated renewal, of the broken, misdirected and otherwise distorted beings and relations in his beloved yet beleaguered creation. Niebuhr elsewhere speaks of 'the dark powers, the Cthonian deities . . . and the Olympian gods' that somehow hold sway over human beings with sinful and destructive consequences.<sup>572</sup>

Nonetheless, urges Niebuhr, despite the many crises and painfully distressing experiences that we both inflict and endure, the faith that Christ himself embodied, and mediates to us, discerns that God's reign is an *emergent reality* with 'universal intent'.<sup>573</sup> That universal intent, as Niebuhr interprets its

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<sup>570</sup> Ibid.

<sup>571</sup> Ibid.

<sup>572</sup> HRN, 'Faith in Gods and in God,' in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture with Supplementary Essays*, op. cit., p. 120. Similarly, Barth speaks of the 'lordless powers' that hold people and communities in thrall to evil and against God's goodness, see Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics, 1V/4 Lecture Fragments*, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1981, pp. 213-233. See also Walter Wink's trilogy, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1984; *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Powers that Determine Human Existence*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1986; *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1992. The biblical basis for these perspectives includes Romans 8:38; 1 Corinthians 15:24; Ephesians 6:12; Colossians 1:16 etc.

<sup>573</sup> The phrase 'universal intent' is from HRN, *The Responsible Self*, op. cit., p. 175. It is one that he appropriated from the work of Michael Polanyi. See, for instance, Michael Polanyi,

disclosure in the *entire* 'Christ-event', is that God's will and work is 'universal redemption'. Niebuhr never directly addresses or attempts to answer the question of 'universalism' but he does at times indicate the expansiveness of his hope, and the futility, not to say sheer folly, of trying to be too dogmatic or specific about who is included or excluded from the scope of God's grace or the community of faith. What he does say, however, is intriguing in its penetrating subtlety and sensitivity to the complexities of the human spirit, and is in direct continuity with insights we gleaned from him in chapter one:

We cannot, particularly when we see how interpersonal faith is and how much a person exists by trust and loyalty, distribute faith and faithlessness by individuals. Every person, so far as he is a self, participates in the life of faith and is a subject of redemption, thus belonging to the Catholic church more or less actively. Every person, so far as he participates in the anxiety, distrust and disloyalty of the world - that is to say every person - is outside the community of faith. The line between church and world runs through every soul, not between souls. Neither is the distinction between visible and invisible church as idealism makes it, that is between the actual and the ideal church, a tenable one. For the church in which we believe, on which we count as the supporting, interpreting community of faith, is actual, interpersonal reality, not a form, but an action, trust and loyalty, experienced over and over again.<sup>574</sup>

For Niebuhr, God's sovereignty has a distinctly eschatological thrust. He interprets God's presence as 'Christo-morphic', eliciting our faithful response to the creative, governing and redeeming actions of God, in ways that transcend present human understanding, but which are nonetheless trusted to be the expression of God's loving wisdom. In the history of Israel, but supremely in Jesus Christ, we learn to discern God's presence and action as both gracious and tenacious, often going 'against the grain' of human desires and deeds, in order to bring about something that the divine mind knows to be ultimately more needful, 'the production of novelty', something which we saw particularly

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*Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-critical Philosophy*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951; Drusilla Scott, *Michael Polanyi*, London, SPCK, 1996.

<sup>574</sup> HRN, *Faith on Earth*, op. cit., p. 117. There are again remarkable affinities with Barth who was famous for his relative indifference to obsessive questions about who was reckoned to be in the Church or not, see Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, op. cit., pp. 445-446. Note also the similarity of Niebuhr's exposition to the 'event-like' character of faith's response to grace. Hunsinger calls this motif 'actualism', see George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, op. cit., pp. 30-32.



in our analysis of Niebuhr's interpretation of human response to the *governing* action of God.<sup>575</sup> In this *eschatologia crucis*, Niebuhr believes that '[o]ur shabby work, our faithless cutting of corners, our efforts to get by, these will but furnish fuel for the world's Gehennas where all the trash we men produce and accumulate must be destroyed if there is to be any glory. Yet even our best work cannot endure unless the transcendent power in being that presides over and works in all our working includes what we do in its deed, a deed not of final destruction but of final recreation. Not of enslavement to futility but of liberation to action, not of death dealing but of life-giving.'<sup>576</sup>

### 3. Faith, Love and Hope

The foregoing analysis of Niebuhr's eschatology, has revealed an *eschatologia crucis* in which God's sovereignty may be described as 'an emergent reality with universal intent'. Put otherwise, it depicts God's creative, governing and redeeming actions as revealed decisively in Jesus Christ as a specific event in time and space, but also continually reiterated throughout history in a process that is 'Christo-morphic'. By grace, through faith, people are called to 'participate in this present passion' in communion with each other and the living Christ. In particular, their lives will therefore be marked by what are often called the 'three theological virtues', and it is with Niebuhr's reflections on this subject, that we complete our analysis of his eschatology.<sup>577</sup>

Niebuhr's initial point is that 'faith, hope and love' are not so much 'virtues' as the tradition has often designated them, as 'gifts' or 'relations' since they are not primarily 'achievements or products of training'. This is consistent with Niebuhr's perennial reference to the sovereign objectivity of divine action

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<sup>575</sup> See Chapter 3, Section 5 where Niebuhr calls this the 'end' or 'purpose' of divine government. God's eschatological purpose or universal intent brings forth new beginnings when human history gets stuck or threatens to destroy or diminish itself.

<sup>576</sup> HRN, 'Man's Work and God's,' in HRN, *Theology, History and Culture*, op. cit., p. 214.

<sup>577</sup> HRN, 'Reflections on Faith, Hope and Love,' unpublished typed manuscript, not clearly dated; also reprinted in *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 2, 1974, pp. 151-156.

relative to dependent humanity. 'The gifts which we call theological virtues in this general sense are not given as states of character but as relations to other beings and particularly as relations to God.'<sup>578</sup>

'Love,' for example, 'is given with the gift of the lovely, the love-attracting; it is called forth by the gift of God himself as the supremely and wholly desirable good; by the gift of the neighbor, as the one beloved by God, as lovely, and as loving the self.'<sup>579</sup> 'Faith,' in familiar Niebuhrian refrain, 'as trust is given with the self-disclosure to a person of God as the faithful One, who not only can be trusted but invites and attracts trust; faith as loyalty or faithfulness is given with the revelation of the supremely challenging cause, the cause of the kingdom of God or the cause of Christ.'<sup>580</sup> And more pertinent to our eschatological analysis here, we note Niebuhr's initially rather terse observation that '[h]ope is given with the gift of a promise or with the gift of a future.'<sup>581</sup>

It is Niebuhr's conviction that these relations or so-called 'theological virtues' 'cannot be reduced to one of the three, as often seems to be suggested.' Since each has its 'distinctive character' none of them 'can be in action without the others.'<sup>582</sup> He proposes, in fact, that they 'are as interconnected as are their bases in the creaturely constitution of the self as being devoted to value [love], as covenanting being [faith] and as being in time [hope]'.<sup>583</sup>

However, it is *hope* which we are particularly required to dwell upon in this chapter, Niebuhr making the interesting observation that, as he understands it, this is 'the peculiarly human theological virtue.'<sup>584</sup> He states that 'hope is related to faith and love' in that 'it is the expectation of the manifestation of God's love and of his faithfulness, that is of his redemption of the promises made to life.' As such, 'its great symbol or focussing point is the coming of Jesus Christ in power.' Included in this sense of *expectation* is the hope that

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<sup>578</sup> HRN, 'Reflections of Faith, Hope and Love,' unpublished typescript, p. 1.

<sup>579</sup> Ibid.

<sup>580</sup> Ibid., pp. 1-2.

<sup>581</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>582</sup> Ibid.

<sup>583</sup> Ibid., p. 3. The words [love], [faith] and [hope] added by myself for added clarity.

<sup>584</sup> Ibid.

God in Christ will forgive those who are unfaithful; perfect the self's own ambivalent and perverted nature; and usher in the 'Kingdom of God' in which the relations between self, companions and God will flourish unconditionally.<sup>585</sup>

However, as well as involving a sense of expectation, hope is also 'the *exercise* of faith and love in the temporal dimension. Hope is the form which faith assumes in relation to the future. It is trust in God with respect to the future. In hope man now trusts God as one who will surely do in the future what he has promised in the past. It is love of the companion appearing in the form of the expectation of divine love to be bestowed on him. Thus the love of Christ (and so of every companion now revalued as in Christ) appears in the form of hope for him. In a sense hope is the form which the love of God takes on the part of man in time who loves the God who is not yet manifest, the God who is the Father of Jesus Christ, God who is love.'<sup>586</sup>

Furthermore, suggests Niebuhr, now with a different time perspective in mind, hope 'is the means by which future faith and love (of which God, companion and self are subjects and objects) are brought into the present.' In other words, 'the more trusting the hope or the more hopeful the trust, the more it is possible now to respond to God and companions with anticipations of the love and faith that shall be. Hope makes for anticipated attainment of faith and love, as when the hopeful heir of immeasurable wealth is lavishly generous on a meagre allowance.' Yet is not only through anticipated attainment, but also through 'preparation' that 'hope is the means for drawing the future into the present, as when the child prepares to become a man by accepting disciplines and by pre-enacting the role which it will play.'<sup>587</sup> But there is one more time dimension to consider, one which demonstrates Niebuhr's pastoral sensitivity to the failures, hurts and tragic losses that people suffer, as much as it does his keen insight into the scope of the hope that belongs to the gospel. In a fitting conclusion to his reflections he writes:

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<sup>585</sup> Ibid.

<sup>586</sup> Ibid., pp. 3-4.

<sup>587</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

Finally, hope is the attitude which faith and love take toward the past. It is the expectation that the faith and love of God will redeem, restore, recreate the past – the personal and the human past. It is the expectation that whatever there was of love of God and his cause, of faithfulness among men will be resurrected, while all hatred and betrayal and mistrust will be destroyed. It says, “Behold all things will become new, including the past.”<sup>588</sup>

George Hunsinger has argued that in the “generous orthodoxy” that typifies ‘postliberal theology’, there is, generally speaking, the combination of ‘a high Christology with an open soteriology.’<sup>589</sup> In chapter two, we pondered how best to classify Niebuhr’s Christology, and suggested it was at least an example of a “middle Christology”, if not quite belonging to the “high” conceptions of Barth or von Balthasar. But with regard to Hunsinger’s notion of an ‘open soteriology’, it would seem that Niebuhr’s eschatology, suggestive rather than substantive, as it is, can indeed be described in some such manner. The logic of God’s sovereignty, as interpreted by the motif of radical monotheism, leads us to surmise that Niebuhr believed that the divine is present in creative, governing and redeeming actions which have ‘universal intent’ so that we may hope that it will yet be the case that *all* will ultimately be reconciled, restored and glorified by the *eschatologia crucis* of Jesus Christ.<sup>590</sup>

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<sup>588</sup> Ibid.

<sup>589</sup> George Hunsinger, ‘Postliberal theology,’ in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 56.

<sup>590</sup> See also the notion of ‘holy silence’ or ‘reverent agnosticism’ in an open soteriology in George Hunsinger, ‘Hellfire and Damnation: Four Ancient and Modern Views,’ in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, op. cit., pp. 226-249.

#### 4. Conclusion

Whilst Niebuhr did not develop an exhaustive and detailed eschatology, our analysis has shown that his work does have a distinctive eschatological orientation. We have designated this as an *eschatologia crucis* since his perspective is greatly informed by the ‘cruciform’ logic of his radical monotheism, which we earlier examined in chapters one and two, and found to be a particularly powerful presentation of the *theologia crucis*. God has come to redeem his creation, especially the human creature, in and through the ‘Christ-event’ and now we live in the time between the ‘first-fruits’ of Christ’s resurrection, and our promised resurrection to eternal life too.

Niebuhr’s fundamental conviction of the sovereignty of God is decisively enacted and revealed in this ‘Christo-morphic’ ingression or incursion into history, such that it is both a specific event and also a constantly reiterated process in which people may participate. Niebuhr’s preferred terminology for this is that Christ is and reveals God’s sovereignty as an ‘emergent reality with universal intent’. In more traditional doctrinal language, we may say that Niebuhr’s eschatology is neither predominantly ‘realised’ (already) nor ‘futurist’ (not yet), but holds these two in a ‘polar’ or dialectical’ tension that is characteristic of so much of his work, and is therefore perhaps best described as an example of an ‘inaugurated’ eschatology, an admittedly very broad category with many variations within it. Responding to God’s grace in Jesus Christ, we live by faith, love, and not least, hope, looking forward to the perfection of all that God has promised to restore or recreate through faithful, suffering love as demonstrated by the cross.<sup>591</sup>

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<sup>591</sup> In addition to the exposition of this theme as already expounded in chapters 2 and 3, see the additional relevant material in HRN, *The Meaning of Revelation*, op. cit., pp. 101-139.

## Summary Conclusion

The title chosen for this thesis was 'Crucial Faith: The Theology and Ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr'. The foregoing argument has, I believe, demonstrated that Niebuhr does articulate just such a *theologia crucis*, and, moreover, does so in a way that is distinct, even unique. Furthermore, his theology of the cross, in terms of both its form and content, is also, I submit, plausible, even persuasive.

Our analysis of Niebuhr's work attempted to 'crystallise out' the *theologia crucis* that tended to remain 'in solution' throughout his corpus. My abiding conviction is that this is not to impose something alien upon his broad-ranging reflections; nor is it a contrived attempt to co-opt his writings for another agenda contrary to his own intentions; rather, it is the testing of an hypothesis, namely, that Niebuhr's largely, implicit, though real *theologia crucis*, is worth the trouble of being brought into more explicit focus as an ongoing resource for the Christian tradition, and others too, to consider and to act upon.

The various loci or perspectives by means of which we have interpreted the focal point of Niebuhr's *theologia crucis* yields the following six-fold summation. It is (1) existentialist in style; (2) evangelical in content; (3) ethical in approach; (4) ecclesiological in context; (5) ecumenical in scope and (6) eschatological in orientation. In slightly more detail, this six-fold summation allows the following conclusions to be drawn:

- (1) It is *existentialist* in terms of *style*. Niebuhr's interests are largely anthropological, and so he engages in penetrating descriptions of the phenomenology of social selfhood. Here, notions of trust and loyalty are considered as the most prominent aspects of faith; and belief, which he considers to be faith as propositional knowledge, has an admittedly subordinate, though, nonetheless, real role in his reflections. In doing so, he depicts the manifold manifestations of sin, particularly identified in terms of human faithlessness, as exposed by the revelation of God in

Jesus Christ. Here we have Niebuhr's *theologia crucis* as an initially *critical anthropological principle*

- (2) It is *evangelical* in terms of *content*. Niebuhr's work tends towards a relatively greater weight of emphasis on matters of soteriology. He is especially concerned with analysing the transformation or conversion of faith through the gift of salvation established by God in Christ. If he is rather less involved in furthering ontological considerations of either divine or human personae, this is perhaps due to his conviction that theology's reflection on the gospel is knowledge of a personal, practical, and experiential nature. Doctrinally speaking, he is at pains to make sure that the conceptual never becomes too theoretical or speculative. Here we have Niebuhr's *theologia crucis* in its central role as a *constructive anthropological principle*.
- (3) It is *ethical* in terms of *approach*. Since the good news of God's creating, governing and saving action has, as its central focus, the transformation of human beings, much attention is necessarily given to interpreting our appropriate responses to the divine intentions and actions. The gospel's indicative as demonstrated in Christ, therefore, involves certain *imperatives* as part of the 'Christo-morphic' ethos or morality that Jesus embodied and inspires. Here we have Niebuhr's *theologia crucis* as a *nuanced imperative or vocational principle*.
- (4) It is *ecclesiological* in terms of *context*. Niebuhr lives and writes as a member of the Church, for it is in the context of this community that God's grace is specifically known and consciously embraced. Well aware of its unity-in-diversity, as well as the irony and tragedy of its perennial faithlessness, Niebuhr is devoted to the Church, convinced that his primary life's work is to contribute to its reformation so that it may participate in Christ's present passion in being responsible to God for his beloved world. Here we have Niebuhr's *ecclesia crucis*.

(5) It is *ecumenical* in terms of *scope*. Niebuhr's portrayal of God as the 'the One beyond the many, in whom the many are one'<sup>592</sup> illustrates two of the twin pillars in his theology of radical monotheism, namely, unity and universality. Since Niebuhr evinces *such a catholic or inclusive* sensibility throughout, he is ever warning against the dangers inherent in, or consequent upon, any tendencies towards defensiveness, exclusiveness, separatism or parochialism. To his mind, such communal practices are based upon false and faithless ideological premises, and the idolatries or henotheisms that attend them only lead to further isolation, exploitation, division and destruction. Here we have Niebuhr's *theologia crucis* as both a *constructive and critical ecumenical principle*.

(6) It is *eschatological* in terms of *orientation*. Since Niebuhr's theology takes both unity and universality with the utmost seriousness, the persistent and unmistakable pulse of an eschatological thrust is detected throughout. Interpreting God's supreme cause as universal creation, governance and redemption, Niebuhr follows the eschatological trajectory of the divine intent as definitively disclosed by the 'Christ-event'. Jesus not only incarnates and mediates faith in God's sovereignty, he also acts as the paradigm of that gracious rule in history, 'an emergent reality with universal intent' working to bring forth new life and to renew hope, in the face of life's unfulfilling aspects and its nihilisms. Here we have Niebuhr's *eschatologia crucis*.

A mind as subtle and searching as Niebuhr's, evident in the descriptive depth and diverse nature of his writings, both published and unpublished, admits of no neat or easy classification. Whether to call Niebuhr's approach 'confessionalist' or 'foundationalist'; 'neo-orthodox', 'post-liberal' or 'neo-liberal'; 'existentialist' or 'evangelical', or any other number of possible labels, is somewhat fruitless and beside the point. Indeed, much of Niebuhr's appeal, and no small part of his value, is that he transcends the too-simple categories by

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<sup>592</sup> HRN, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, op. cit., p. 16.



which great thinkers and their legacies often become diminished, distorted or misrepresented by lesser, more prosaic, minds.

If an appropriate overarching description of his life's work is to be attempted, perhaps none fits better than his own appellation of 'Christian moral philosophy', where each word contributes something essential to his project as a whole.<sup>593</sup> It is 'Christian' because its theocentric understanding of life is defined by the revelation of God to humanity in Jesus Christ, calling for the confession and demonstration of the truth and meaning of this decisive event. It is 'moral' because the indicative of God's sovereign grace in Christ leads to an ethos or ethics, in which human praxis or agency is transformed by responding in ways that fit the imperatives of divine action. And it is 'philosophy' because it is a search for, love of, and sharing abroad, that seasoned wisdom which serves the end of understanding and enhancing our existence: what he once called 'the never-ending pilgrim's progress of the reasoning Christian heart.'<sup>594</sup>

I chose as my thesis title: 'Crucial Faith: The Theology and Ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr' because of my hunch that his Christian moral philosophy has, throughout its diverse interests and perspectives, a coherent or implicitly systematic thrust. I believe that the various loci through which my argument has moved, justifies this hunch to the extent that it presents Niebuhr's distinctive, even unique *theologia crucis* as being at least plausible, or better still, persuasive. Like any theology, it is not without its weaknesses and inadequacies, indeed, Niebuhr both welcomed constructive criticisms of his work, and saw his as only one contribution to the mutual and supplementary efforts of many practitioners in the same field. If it is not in every respect a sufficient exposition of the orthodox Trinitarian gospel, it is nonetheless a worthy contribution to a genre perhaps best described as a prophetic wisdom of the cross. As such it offers a discerning interpretation of the indicatives and imperatives of divine grace to which humans are called to respond in faithful 'Christo-morphic' discipleship.

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<sup>593</sup> HRN, *The Responsible Self*, op. cit., pp. 42-46.

<sup>594</sup> HRN, *The Meaning of Revelation*, op. cit., p. 100.

Hans Frei said of any and every theological work that the 'proof of the pudding is in the eating, not in any printed recipe.'<sup>595</sup> I submit that Niebuhr's *theologia crucis* as an *ethos* of the cross meets the requirements of this pragmatic test, for as '*crucial faith*' it *necessarily participates in the passion of Jesus Christ crucified*, and as '*crucial faith*' it trusts that his *resurrection* is the pledge of our salvation. It seeks, therefore, to be loyal, in spite of the enormity of sin and suffering, to the supreme cause of God's Coming Kingdom where communion is perfected in the joy of consummation.

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<sup>595</sup> Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, op. cit., p. 146.

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- II. 'Believing and Knowing in Community,' 15pp.
- III. 'The Structure of Faith,' 23 pp.
- IV. 'Broken Faith,' 23pp.
- V. 'The Reconstruction of Faith,' 22 pp.
- VI. 'The Community of Faith,' 19pp.

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