

**FROM A CHRISTIAN SOCIALIST TO A CHRISTIAN REALIST:  
REINHOLD NIEBUHR AND THE SOVIET UNION, 1930-1945**

**CHEN LIANG**

(M.A)

*The Graduate School of  
Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*

**A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY**

**NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE**

**2007**

## **Acknowledgements**

This study of Reinhold Niebuhr would not have been possible without the generosity of the National University of Singapore (NUS). I want to express special thanks to the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) of NUS for awarding me a research scholarship for four consecutive years. FASS also funded my four months' fieldwork in the U.S. in 2005, as well as an earlier conference trip to the University of California, Davis. The Png Poh Seng Prize (Best Student in History) it awarded me in the 2003-2004 academic year has been a constant reminder that this thesis should be written to a high standard.

My supervisor Professor Ian Lewis Gordon, former head of History Department of NUS and Dr. Stephen Lee Keck, my former supervisor, who left NUS to teach at the American University of Sharjah in 2006, played critical roles in the development of this thesis. Professor Gordon painstakingly went through the whole draft and provided invaluable suggestions and corrections. His attention to details in editing my writing has left indelible marks on my mind. I am truly grateful to him for the time and energy he has put in my thesis. Dr. Keck, a very supportive and patient supervisor as well, guided me through the initial stages of this project until he left Singapore. With Dr. Keck's introduction, I was honoured to get acquainted with his father, Professor Leander Keck, former dean of Yale Divinity School (YDS), who, despite his old age, personally introduced me to the librarians of YDS library and showed me around Yale during my

fieldtrip to the U.S. Stimulating conversations with Professor Keck at Yale made my U.S. trip a much more memorable experience. I want to take this opportunity to thank Professor Keck for his kindness and generosity. I also want to express my gratitude to Dr. Keck for everything he has done for me over the years.

Thanks must also be expressed to the following people, who, in different ways, helped during my study at NUS. They are: Ms. Sherry Su of Dow Jones Newswires; Professor Peter Borschberg, Professor Thomas DuBois, Professor Huang Jianli, Professor Brian Farrell, and Ms. Kelly Lau of History Department, NUS.

I am also grateful to the librarians and staff at the NUS library, the Library of Congress in Washington D.C, the Burke Library at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City, the YDS library at Yale University and the National Library of China in Beijing. The superb Inter-library Loan Service provided by the NUS library was particularly helpful in my initial research.

To all those, named and unnamed, who helped in various ways I am grateful. Whatever errors or mistakes found on the pages of this thesis are my own.

## Table of Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <b>Acknowledgements</b>  | i   |
| <b>Summary</b>   | iv  |
| <b>Introduction</b>  | 1   |
| <b>Chapter One: The End of a Decade: 1920s</b>                         | 26  |
| American Intellectuals and the Soviet Union in the 1920s               | 27  |
| The “Tamed Cynic” in the 1920s   | 30  |
| The Move to New York   | 33  |
| Niebuhr and Harry Ward   | 37  |
| Niebuhr and Sherwood Eddy  | 40  |
| <b>Chapter Two: A Trip to the Soviet Union: Early 1930s</b>            | 49  |
| An Unforgettable Trip  | 50  |
| Observing the Impact of the Soviet Union’s Industrialization from afar | 70  |
| <b>Chapter Three: The Religion of Communism: mid-1930s</b>             | 79  |
| The Nature of Religion   | 80  |
| The Religion of Communism  | 89  |
| The Origin of Russian Communism  | 102 |
| <b>Chapter Four: Toward a Christian Political Ethic: Late 1930s</b>    | 111 |
| Criticisms of Christianity   | 112 |
| Theologians and Communism  | 122 |
| The Need for a Radical Religion  | 129 |
| Myth and Meaning   | 135 |
| The Rediscovery of Sin   | 151 |
| Political Sin Revealed – the Moscow Trials                             | 161 |
| <b>Chapter Five: Russia, a Great Comrade: World War II</b>             | 177 |
| An End to Illusions  | 179 |
| Russia, a Comrade in Arms  | 189 |
| Russia, a Partner after the War  | 198 |
| <b>Conclusion</b>  | 216 |
| <b>Select Bibliography</b>   | 229 |

## Summary

Built largely on his journalistic writings, this study reveals that the Soviet Union occupied a very special position in the development of Reinhold Niebuhr's thought. Niebuhr's engagement with the Soviet Union from 1930 to 1945, this dissertation argues, played a decisive role in the formation of Christian realism, a process that was marked by his unflagging effort to bring Christianity to bear upon the urgent social and political problems of contemporary society.

This was embodied in the following aspects. First, Niebuhr's encounter with the communist religion (as he called communism) not only resulted in his rejection of the liberalistic interpretation of religion but also greatly deepened his understanding of the nature of religious faith itself. Second, grappling with this communist religion also drove Niebuhr to see more clearly the impotency of Western Christianity when it came to the problem of justice. The launch of *Radical Religion* in the mid-1930s represented Niebuhr's concrete effort in revitalizing Christianity so that Christians could rise up to the challenges of contemporary political and social problems. Third, his "flirtation" with Marxism not only led him to "rediscover" sin, the linchpin of Christian realism, but also contributed to the emergence of the key category, namely, myth and meaning in his theology. Lastly, Niebuhr's realistic approach to international power politics, culminating in the "positive defense" policy regarding the reconstruction of Europe during the period under examination, was a direct result of his engagement with the Soviet Union.

## Introduction

### Background of the Study

Reinhold Niebuhr, “the greatest Protestant theologian born in America since Jonathan Edwards,” left behind not only a legacy of theological realism that was underpinned by his reinterpretation of the notion of “sin”, but also a remarkable career of active political involvement almost exceptional in his profession.<sup>1</sup> A Christian idealist in the 1920s, a socialist radical in the 1930s, a seasoned realist during the Second World War and afterwards, the trajectory of Reinhold Niebuhr’s career was as impressive as the scope of his masterpiece, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, in which he grappled with various philosophies like Rationalism, Idealism, Romanticism, and Marxism.

In his intellectual biography essay, Niebuhr described the central interest of his life as “the defence and justification of the Christian faith in a secular age, particularly among what Schleiermacher called Christianity’s ‘intellectual despisers.’ ”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, like his distinguished contemporaries Emil Brunner, Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, who worked for more than twenty years as his friend and colleague at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City, Niebuhr’s deepest conviction was that the Christian estimate of man is truer and profounder than any of its secular alternatives. But unlike these prominent figures – and other American Christian thinkers such as Harry Ward, another of his colleagues at Union – Niebuhr developed a distinctive perspective in understanding

---

<sup>1</sup> “Death of a Christian Realist”, *TIME* magazine (Monday, June 14, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Intellectual Biography”, in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956), edited by Charles Kegley and Robert Bretall, P. 3.

human nature and social realities, and was passionate in relating biblical faith to political and social problems. Emil Brunner once summarized Niebuhr's distinctive contributions this way:

With him theology broke into the world; theology was no longer quarantined, and men of letters, philosophers, sociologists, historians, even statesmen, began to listen. Once more theology was becoming a spiritual force to be reckoned with. Reinhold Niebuhr has realized, as no one else has, what I have been postulating for decades but could not accomplish to any degree in an atmosphere ruled by abstract dogmatism: namely, theology in conversation with the leading intellects of the age.<sup>3</sup>

When *TIME* magazine featured Niebuhr in the cover story of its twenty-fifth anniversary issue, as one of his biographers Charles Brown pointed out, it was essentially in recognition of his stature as the nation's foremost religious and political thinker.<sup>4</sup> Often thought of as "the father of Christian realism," Niebuhr had fully developed his "liberal realist faith" by the end of the Second World War.<sup>5</sup> But As Robin Lovin observed, Niebuhr gave little time to definitions in his work and this was especially apparent in the terminology of Christian realism itself: "Niebuhr's position emerged as a complex of theological conviction, moral theory, and meditation on human nature in which the elements were mutually reinforcing, rather than systematically related."<sup>6</sup> In a nutshell, these mutually reinforcing elements include (but are not limited to): an understanding of faith as primarily an expression of trust in the meaningfulness of human existence; a reinterpretation of "sin" as pride or human self-centeredness; a recognition of love as the

---

<sup>3</sup> Emil Brunner, "Some Remarks on Reinhold Niebuhr's Work as a Christian Thinker", in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, P. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Role in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), P. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Richard W. Fox, "Reinhold Niebuhr and the Emergence of the Liberal Realist Faith, 1930-1945", *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (April 1976), P. 264.

<sup>6</sup> Robin Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), P. 3

highest ideal in ethics and justice as the ultimate goal in politics respectively; an emphasis on the dialectic relationship between love and justice; an apprehension of mystery and meaning within and beyond the dramas of history; a pragmatic tactic of pursuing proximate rather than final solutions in politics.

However, when he joined Union in 1928, a time when the Social Gospel movement still held sway at the nation's most prestigious Protestant seminary, Niebuhr was anything but a realist. Indeed, just one year before joining Union, in his first book *Does Civilization Need Religion?*, Niebuhr wrote that religion "was the champion of personality in a seemingly impersonal world."<sup>7</sup> The Christian faith, for the newly appointed Professor of Christian Ethics, was still "in some way identical with the moral idealism of the past century."<sup>8</sup> This moral idealism, as embodied by the Social Gospel, was characterized by a conviction that the Kingdom of God represented not only the final end of man but also man's historical hope. Specifically, after the First World War, it was widely believed in Social Gospel circles that the Kingdom of God could be realized on earth; that the laws of the Kingdom of God were identical with the laws of human society; that the Christian ethic was directly applicable to social and political problems. In many ways, even when he joined the Socialist Party in 1929, Niebuhr still belonged to this religiously idealistic camp.

---

<sup>7</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Does Civilization Need Religion: A Study in the Social Resources and Limitations of Religion in Modern Life* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927), P. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Intellectual Biography", in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956), edited by Charles Kegley and Robert Bretall, P. 9.

So how did Niebuhr gradually shake off his religious idealism and evolve into a well known Christian realist in the 1930s and 40s? Admittedly, there is no easy answer to a complicated question like this. Niebuhr's critics, often pointing their fingers at the "inconstancy" of his thoughts, have found plenty of ammunition in the changes of his political and theological views. To them, the "inconstancy" of Niebuhr's thought not only betrayed a lack of an elaborate system in his theology as compared to that of his great contemporaries, but also smacked of relativity and expediency. In the eyes of some critics, under the pressure of the Cold War, Niebuhr did not even hold on to the kind of Christian realism that he had been endeavouring to build. For example, Christopher Lasch, the American social critic and historian, charged that the most instructive aspect of Niebuhr's career was the rapidity with which his realism degenerated into "a bland and innocuous liberalism" after the Second World War.<sup>9</sup>

More people have come to Niebuhr's defence. They commonly attribute Niebuhr's willingness to change his political inclinations as well as theological views to his pragmatism. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., the famous American historian who died recently, once observed:

"Niebuhr was a child of the pragmatic revolt. Nature had made him an instinctive empiricist; he had sharp political intuitions, an astute tactical sense, and an instinct for realism; and his first response to situations requiring decision was typically as a pragmatist, not as a moralist or a perfectionalist. He shared with William James a vivid sense of the universe as open and unfinished, always incomplete, always fertile, always effervescent with novelty."<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type* (New York: Knopf, 1965), P. 300.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Reinhold Niebuhr's Role in American Political Thought and Life", in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, edited by Charles Kegley and Robert Bretall, P. 131.

Niebuhr's instinct for pragmatism was not lost on his other close friends and biographers either. Reviewing one of Niebuhr's books, John Bennett remarked that as a Christian theologian, his colleague "believes in the Christian revelation because it fits the facts.....he is fundamentally an empiricist rather than a traditionalist..."<sup>11</sup> "In retrospect", argued Ronald Stone, another of Niebuhr's biographers, "Niebuhr's debt to pragmatism can be seen throughout his writing".<sup>12</sup> Richard Fox, much more critical of Niebuhr than Stone was, agreed: "Like Dewey he was a pragmatist, a relativist, and a pluralist at heart. He hated absolutism of any kind."<sup>13</sup> Delving into Niebuhr's philosophy of history, Robert Fitch concluded: "we may place him squarely in the great American tradition of pragmatism. He is the grateful heir of William James."<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, with regard to his intellectual kinship with William James, Niebuhr himself acknowledged that "I stand in the William James tradition. He was both an empiricist and a religious man, and his faith was both the consequence and the presupposition of his pragmatism."<sup>15</sup> As if talking directly to his intellectual heir, the father of American pragmatism once commented on the provisional feature of human insights this way:

"The wisest of critics is an altering being, subject to the better insight of the morrow, and right at any moment, only 'up to date' and 'on the whole.' When larger ranges of truth open, it is surely best to be able to open ourselves to their reception, unfettered by our previous pretensions."<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> John Bennett, book review of *Beyond Tragedy*, *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 18, No. 3 ( July 1938), P. 336.

<sup>12</sup> Ronald Stone, *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr: A Mentor to the Twentieth Century* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1992), P. 205.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), P. 165.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Fitch, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Philosophy of History", in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, P. 308.

<sup>15</sup> June Bingham, *Courage to Change: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), P. 224.

<sup>16</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: The

Niebuhr, a critic of liberalism, rationalism and idealism, or any philosophy other than Christian realism for that matter, surely had listened. True to his pragmatist nature, he had never locked himself into any closed philosophical and theological systems. Rather, he readily changed his views once he realized their incompleteness and always kept his mind open to new possibilities.

More revealingly, as to how and why his mind had changed, Niebuhr once made such a confession:

“The gradual unfolding of my theological ideas has come not so much through study as through the pressure of world events. Whatever measure of Christian faith I hold today is due to the gradual exclusion of alternative beliefs through world history.”<sup>17</sup>

As his wife Ursula Niebuhr recalled, Niebuhr never regarded himself as a scholar in the usual, more restricted sense, rather, he liked to describe himself as “a parson with a journalistic urge, who somehow had strayed into the academic world and hovered on the fringes of the political world.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, with extreme sensitivities to human distress, Niebuhr not only called on Christians to take responsibility for political life through his writings, but also actively involved himself in the eventful political life of the twentieth century. Consequently, his thought bore the distinct imprints of the significant events of his time, and this in fact constituted the essential source of its strength and relevance. It takes not only wisdom, but also courage to change, sometimes.

---

Modern Library, 2002), P. 365.

<sup>17</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Ten Years That Shook My World”, Fourteenth article in the series “How My Mind Has Changed in This Decade”, *The Christian Century*, Vol. 56, No. 17( April 26, 1939), P. 546.

<sup>18</sup> Ursula Niebuhr, *Remembering Reinhold Niebuhr: Letters of Reinhold & Ursula M. Niebuhr* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), P. 2.

## **Purpose of the Study**

To find out what prompted the shifts of Niebuhr's theological and political views, therefore, it is indispensable to look at how he responded to world events and what kind of alternative beliefs he once subscribed to, but eventually rejected. My study of Niebuhr's engagement with the Soviet Union from 1930 to 1945, combining examinations of both his reactions to important world events and his "flirtation" with Marxism, is essentially an attempt in this regard.

Quite a lot of studies have been done on Niebuhr's encounter with Marxism. But most of those studies approached this subject from a philosophical perspective. Yet as Niebuhr himself made clear, his interests in Marxism and the unfolding of his theological ideas did not originate from his love of philosophical study. Rather, it was the close relatedness of Marxism to contemporary experience that made him grow increasingly attached to this philosophy in the 1930s. For Niebuhr, in other words, the main attraction of Marxism lay in its usefulness as a guide in establishing a just and equal society. For this reason, it is fair to say that Niebuhr was in fact more interested in the application of Marxism in modern societies than the Marxist dogmas themselves. Consequently, without studying Niebuhr's engagement with the Soviet Union, where Marxism found its first implementation, it is hardly possible to paint a complete picture of his views on Marxism. That said, it is worth stressing that examining Niebuhr's views on the Soviet Union, rather than Marxism, is the main task of my study.

The necessity to single out his engagement with the Soviet Union, rather than other specific countries, like Germany or Britain for investigation, could also be justified by the importance Niebuhr himself attached to this communist country.<sup>19</sup> Starting from the beginning of the 1930s, Niebuhr began to pay special attention to the so-called champion of the proletariat cause for a variety of reasons. Though eventually disillusioned with it, his interests in the Soviet Union persisted into the Cold War period and his harsh criticisms of the Soviet empire even earned him the misnomer of “Cold Warrior”.

In a sense, for Niebuhr, both the beginning and the ending of the 1930s were defined by significant events related to the Soviet Union. The decade that shook his world got off to an exciting start. In the fall of 1930, as many American intellectuals flocked to the Soviet Union to witness the Great Experiment in the making, Niebuhr, who signed up his Socialist Party membership card a year earlier, jumped on the bandwagon too. Viewing his trip as one of the greatest events of his life at the time, as late as 1936, Niebuhr still held that the Russian experiment was “the most thrilling social venture in modern history.”<sup>20</sup> However, for Niebuhr and many on the left who had been looking to the Soviet Union for a workable alternative to the seemingly moribund capitalist system, the 1930s ended on a rather tragic note: first came the Moscow Trials, then the Nazi-Soviet Pact. In the wake of the Moscow Trials, a disillusioned Niebuhr lamented that the growth of political tyranny in the Soviet Union was like “the premature death of an infant”, hence “We might as well make up our minds to the fact that a new society must

---

<sup>19</sup> Richard Fox suggested that Russia, Britain and Germany are all emotionally charged images in Niebuhr’s Christian realism. See Richard Fox, “Reinhold Niebuhr and the Emergence of the Liberal Realist Faith, 1930-1945”, *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (April 1976). P. 264.

<sup>20</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, Review of *Soviet Communism: A New Civilization*, by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *Radical Religion*, Vol.1, No. 3 (Spring 1936). P. 38.

be brought to birth in European civilization without too much help from the Russian experiment.”<sup>21</sup> How much hope Niebuhr pinned on the Russian experiment for the birth of a new society where justice and equality would prevail was thus crystal clear.

Niebuhr’s interests in the Soviet Union did not ebb away after the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Nor did he turn into a fierce anti-communist from that point. On the contrary, as demonstrated by his writings during the war, the question of “Russia’s Partnership in War and Peace” (the title of one of his editorials in *Christianity and Crisis*) remained his overriding concern once Hitler forced the Soviet Union out of its isolation. In Niebuhr’s view, the relation between Russia and the West, in particular America, must be treated as “the primary hazard to a future peace.”<sup>22</sup> More importantly, he once observed during the war, a partnership between the Soviet Union and the West would ensure that “Russia will be a counterbalance to purely Anglo-Saxon interests and will therefore tend to make for a better peace.”<sup>23</sup>

Guided by such a belief, as a disillusioned radical, Niebuhr exhibited extraordinarily conciliatory attitudes towards the Soviet regime during the war. When the Soviet Union made territorial claims over the Baltic states and Poland in 1941, he judged that those demands “did not represent insuperable obstacles to effective collaboration between Russia and the Western world.”<sup>24</sup> While many in the West became increasingly

---

<sup>21</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia and Japan”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Summer 1938). P. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia and the Peace”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 4, No. 19 (November 13, 1944). P. 2.

<sup>23</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia’s Partnership in War and Peace”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (February 23, 1942). P. 2.

<sup>24</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia and the Peace”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Summer 1941), P. 8.

concerned over the Soviet Union's desire for a strategic frontier as the war progressed toward an end, Niebuhr asserted that though the Russians' demands were high, "they would not be too high if they paved the way for a system of mutual security."<sup>25</sup> The essence of realism, Niebuhr once remarked, was the recognition of an equilibrium or conflict of power because of the perpetual character of human self-interest.<sup>26</sup> There could be no better explanation than this for the basis of Niebuhr's "appeasement" of the Soviet Union during the war.<sup>27</sup>

It is obvious that whether during the 1930s, or through the Second World War, the Soviet Union, for Niebuhr, was by no means merely "an emotionally charged image" as Richard Fox suggested.<sup>28</sup> In fact, the first socialist country on earth occupied a very special position in the development of Niebuhr's thought. Experimenting with Marxism for the first time in human history, the Soviet Union was initially a beacon of hope to radicals like Niebuhr who found Marxism's critiques of capitalism validated by the Great Depression. As his engagement with the Soviet Union deepened, particularly after the Moscow Trials, however, Niebuhr changed his mind and grew increasingly disenchanted with the socialist cause. But the remarkable thing was, though disillusioned, he did not morph into a fierce anti-communist after the Nazi-Soviet Pact as many radicals did. On the contrary, during the Second World War, as a consummate pragmatist, he advocated tirelessly that the Soviet Union should be treated by the West as a great comrade.

---

<sup>25</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "From Wilson to Roosevelt", *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Fall 1943), P. 4.

<sup>26</sup> Ronald H. Stone, "An Interview with Reinhold Niebuhr", *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (March 17, 1969), P. 51.

<sup>27</sup> Niebuhr was accused of "appeasing" the Russians by some because of his conciliatory attitudes towards the Soviet regime. See Reinhold Niebuhr, "Russia and the West", *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Summer 1945), P. 6.

<sup>28</sup> See Richard Fox, "Reinhold Niebuhr and the Emergence of the Liberal Realist Faith, 1930-1945", P. 264.

The purpose of my study, in a word, is to examine how Niebuhr's encounter with a country that he deemed very special shaped his political and theological realism. This is done chiefly by looking at his writings on the Soviet Union during the period under examination.

### **Major Arguments and Structure**

This thesis is not a study of Niebuhr's theology. Nevertheless, as the thesis aims to shed light on how Niebuhr's political and theological thoughts shifted, it is important to highlight some of his major theological ideas which are relevant to this study and which make him so unique among his contemporaries.

Niebuhr was convinced, as reflected in his best-known work, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, that "the sense of individuality" was rooted in the faith of the Bible and had primarily Hebraic roots. As Nathan Scott pointed out, Niebuhr stood in that great line of Christian thinkers – stretching from St. Augustine to Pascal and from Kierkegaard to Berdyaev – whose primary concern was with the doctrine of man.<sup>29</sup> In Niebuhr's view, as a child of nature, man stands at the juncture of nature and spirit. Yet tempted to escape from his finitude, man views himself as the end and source of his life. Man's inordinate self-regard, or pride, constitutes "sin". This unique interpretation of "sin", or a "realistic" interpretation of human nature as Niebuhr put it, lies at the root of his major

---

<sup>29</sup> Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "Reinhold Niebuhr", in Ralph Ross ed. *Makers of American Thought: An Introduction to Seven American Writers* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974), P. 230.

line of thought.<sup>30</sup> Because of his preoccupation with the notion of “sin” in his works, Niebuhr was also credited with having “rediscovered sin.”<sup>31</sup> This thesis argues that Niebuhr’s engagement with the Soviet Union was an important factor in leading him to “rediscover” sin.

Another important aspect of Niebuhr’s theology is “myth and meaning.” As Niebuhr saw it, one fundamental situation of human existence is that almost everybody is committed to a certain frame of meaning, through which one asserts the significance of life. Yet every frame of meaning is built upon some presuppositions which can not be verified empirically. To believe in something that cannot be validated by rational calculation is essentially an act of faith. This is why Niebuhr also classified communism as a religion in his works. A genuine faith – a belief in the divine – bears a trust in the ultimate comprehensiveness and purposefulness of reality. Myth, or the mystery of the divine, asserts and enriches the meaning of life. Only a belief in the divine as the end and source of life can do justice to the givenness and the incongruities of our existence. The central Biblical myths, like Creation, Crucifixion and Resurrection, etc., Niebuhr maintained, should be interpreted symbolically and poetically but not literally. Only in this way could the Biblical myths be grasped existentially – taken together, these symbols are essentially poetic pointers towards the fundamental human condition. Niebuhr’s unique interpretation of religious symbols and meaning ultimately set him apart from his colleagues. With a study of his attitude towards the “communist religion” (never a

---

<sup>30</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, Preface to the 1964 edition of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1964).

<sup>31</sup> “Sin Rediscovered”, book review, *Time* magazine (Monday, March 24, 1941).

genuine faith in his view), this thesis suggests that Niebuhr's approach to myth and meaning was also influenced by his encounter with communism.

Overall, this study reveals that Niebuhr's engagement with the Soviet Union from 1930 to 1945 played a significant role in the formation of Christian realism, a process that was marked by his unflinching effort to bring Christianity to bear upon the urgent social and political problems of contemporary society. Broadly, this was embodied in two aspects: one political, the other theological.

Politically, in this eventful period, influenced by the Marxist analysis of class struggle, Niebuhr, always sympathetic to the poor and disinherited, at first developed a very tough-minded approach to politics: the goal of politics was to seek justice, using force if necessary. This "tough-mindedness" was nowhere more conspicuous than in his first major work *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932). It was the gradual revelations of the brutalities of the Soviet regime, such as the liquidations of "class enemies" in its forced collectivization that brought Niebuhr's attention to the dangers of the misuse of power by the proletariat, an allegedly disinterested class. Subsequently, he began to qualify his stance on the use of power in achieving justice. The problem of the abuse of power by the weak and the poor, or the danger of political tyranny by the new ruling class in a socialist society, was then thrown into sharp relief by the dramatic Moscow Trials. It finally dawned on Niebuhr that power, whether in the hands of the ruling class or the ruled, was the perennial source of corruption and therefore needed to be checked by

democratic means. Self-interest, a perpetual human character, lay at the heart of power politics, Niebuhr was forced to conclude.

When Niebuhr remarked that the Nazi-Soviet Pact was perfectly logical from the standpoint of power politics in one editorial of *Radical Religion* in the fall of 1939, he did not mean to justify the Soviet Union's decision as a former Soviet sympathizer – by then, he was completely disillusioned with the Soviet cause and had quit the Socialist Party shortly after the Pact was signed. Rather, it was a shrewd observation from a maturing realist who now easily detected the ideological pretence and self-interest in international politics as well. Any allegedly transcendent disinterestedness in the arena of world politics, Niebuhr pointed out, was extremely hard, if not impossible to achieve. Guided by this realistic analysis of international politics, Niebuhr proposed that it was in the West's own interests to form an alliance with communist Russia in the face of the Nazi menace. He therefore courageously called on the west countries, which were still smarting from the notorious Nazi-Soviet Pact, to form a “fateful” comradeship with the Soviet regime.

It was the same political realism that underlay Niebuhr's “appeasement” of the Soviet Union regarding its territorial ambitions during the war. As international peace involved a balance of power, Niebuhr maintained, to the dismay of some of his critics, it was important that Russia should act as a counterbalance to purely Anglo-Saxon interests in the post-war world. But as the Soviet Union grew increasingly aggressive at the end of the war, Niebuhr focused his attention on the possible conflicts between the two

ideologically opposed powerful countries, namely the Soviet Union and the U.S.A after the war. To head off a dreadful showdown between the two powers, sacrifices had to be made on the West's part. The reason, Niebuhr argued, was because although justice was the highest ideal in the political arena, the instrument of justice could only function within a framework of order. In the wake of the Second World War, order had to precede justice, even at the expense of some "small" nations. Facing the expansion of Russian communism in Europe and beyond, the best way for the West to maintain order in a war-ravaged world was a "policy of positive defence," that is, while the West should stand firmly against the Soviet Union on some strategic issues, it should put more effort into restoring the economic life of the European continent.

Niebuhr's engagement with the Soviet Union also had a great impact on the development of his theological thought. First, his encounter with the communist religion (as he called communism), prompted him to discard his old liberalistic interpretation of religion and eventually drove him to define the nature of religious faith as a trust in the meaningfulness of life. Already skeptical about the idealism of liberal Christianity at the end of the 1920s, during his trip to the Soviet Union in 1930, Niebuhr found in the communist religion a vital social incentive superior to his own highly moralistic liberal creed. The Russian people's enthusiasm in embracing the Five Year Plan, he asserted, ultimately resulted from the religious appeal of communism. The reason why the Russian people were willing to make great sacrifices for the communist cause, Niebuhr believed, was because communism, promising heaven on earth, carried its followers' trust in the meaningfulness of their lives. Religious belief, Niebuhr concluded in the

mid-1930s, was essentially an expression of trust in the meaningfulness of human existence. Niebuhr's views on the nature of religious faith as such remained unchanged till the end of his life. While how a theologian formed his views of the nature of religious faith is an extremely complicated matter, it is unmistakable that Niebuhr's encounter with communism had a great impact on his understanding of this issue.

Second, Niebuhr's engagement with the communist religion also contributed to the emergence of the central category "myth and meaning" in his theology. One of communism's appeals to Niebuhr in the early 1930s was that, by promising salvation through destruction, communism constituted a very powerful mythology to the oppressed and the poor. Impressed by the powerful influence that the communist mythology exerted on its followers, Niebuhr began to pay more attention to the nature of religious myth or symbol, as was reflected clearly in his 1934 book *An interpretation of Christian Ethics*. To meet the challenge of the powerful yet inferior communist mythology (it was inferior, because it denied the existence of God, in Niebuhr's view), Niebuhr felt that the role of religious symbols must be reinterpreted. Religious myths, Niebuhr came to believe, are pointers of meaning and truth that suggest the vertical dimensions of reality. As human existence is perennially surrounded by the penumbra of mystery, finite minds can only use religious symbols or myths to catch a glimpse of that which transcends and fulfills history.

Third, coming to grips with the communist religion made Niebuhr become keenly aware of the impotency of Western Christianity when it came to the problem of justice, hence

his strong criticisms of Christian orthodoxy, liberal Christianity and asceticism. Communism, for all its evils, in Niebuhr's view, deserved credit for its commitment to justice. Christianity, on the other hand, Niebuhr charged in the mid-1930s, failed to tackle the problem of justice because it regarded sacrificial love as the highest ideal, yet the highest ideal in the realm of politics was justice. To relate Christianity to social and political problems, a viable Christian political ethic, more specifically, a dialectic relationship between love and justice must be established. The founding of *Radical Religion* in 1935 represented Niebuhr's concrete effort in this regard. As its inaugural editorial suggested, the mission of the journal was to "clarify the affinities and divergences in Marxian and Christian thought."<sup>32</sup> In a way, this also pointed out the direction of the evolution of Christian realism.

Finally, Niebuhr's engagement with Russian communism also led him to dust off the dogma of sin, the cornerstone of Christian realism. In the same inaugural editorial of *Radical Religion*, Niebuhr admitted frankly that Marxism provided a valuable insight "which lies at the heart of prophetic religion and which Marxism has rediscovered: the insight that man's cultural, moral and religious achievements are never absolute, that they are colored and conditioned by human finiteness and corrupted by sin."<sup>33</sup> For Niebuhr, the idea that the whole human enterprise was perennially tainted by sin was not only validated but also reinforced by the series of shocking events that took place in the Soviet Union in the 1930s: the brutal liquidation of class enemies, the Moscow Trials, the purge of the Red Army and the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Together, these events forcefully punctured

---

<sup>32</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, Editorial, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1935), P. 3.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

the Marxist myth that the social objectives and interests of the proletariat were transcendent and absolute.

The dissertation is arranged in a chronological order. Starting with a brief introduction about American intellectuals' attitudes toward the Soviet Union in the 1920s, the first chapter of my thesis serves as the backdrop against which Niebuhr's encounter with the Soviet Union occurred. By introducing his close associations with Sherwood Eddy and Harry Ward, two prominent Soviet sympathizers at the time, this chapter also intends to show how prepared Niebuhr was as he embarked on his journey to the Soviet Union amid the deepening Depression.

Niebuhr's engagement with the Soviet Union in the 1930s is analyzed in the three following chapters, which roughly correspond to the time period of the early 1930s (Chapter Two), mid-30s (Chapter Three) and late 30s (Chapter Four). Chapter Two examines Niebuhr's momentous trip to the Soviet Union in 1930, as well as how he continued to observe the Russian experiment from afar after he came back. Chapter Three investigates how Niebuhr came to see communism as a form of religion. In this process, it also examines his views on the nature of religious faith and the origins of Russian communism. Chapter Four shows how Niebuhr responded to the challenge of Russian communism by introducing his criticisms of Christianity, the launch of *Radical Religion*, the emergence of myth and meaning in his theology, and his rediscovery of sin in connection with his reactions to the Moscow Trials.

Chapter Five studies Niebuhr's realistic approach to the Soviet Union during the Second World War. Starting with his comments on the Nazi-Soviet Pact, this chapter first examines how Niebuhr cast away his residual illusions in the Russian experiment in the wake of the signing of the Pact. It then goes on to probe his conciliatory attitudes towards the Soviet Union throughout the war.

### **Terminology**

As this thesis examines the time period of 1930-1945, obviously the accurate term for the country Niebuhr engaged with is "the Soviet Union." But as Niebuhr mostly identified "Russia" with "the Soviet Union" in his writings, this thesis has chosen to conform to his usage in most cases. Also for the sake of conformity, the word "man" was endowed with the same meaning – human – as in Niebuhr's works whenever his ideas were rephrased in this thesis.

Two terms in the thesis's title need particular explanation. Niebuhr joined the American Socialist Party in 1929, which is roughly the starting point of this study. The term "Christian socialist" was used to specify Niebuhr's status at the end of the 1920s – he was a Christian, and he was a socialist, a totally unimaginable combination otherwise in socialist countries like China. The term was also employed to underscore Niebuhr's idealism at that time. If the socialist aspirations – the abolition of private property, effective social and economic planning, and a proletarian democracy, etc. – were idealistic in their own right, then to combine these aspirations with the tenets of Social

Gospel was even more idealistic. As to “Christian realist”, it means first, as a Christian, Niebuhr had rejected his religious and political idealism by the end of 1945. It also denotes that Niebuhr had developed a complex of mutually reinforcing ideas which constitute the essence of Christian realism. These mutually reinforcing elements, threaded together by his “realistic” interpretation of human nature, have been introduced previously.

In studying the period during which Niebuhr was a socialist, this thesis places Niebuhr in the rank of the “American Left.” To avoid any confusion, a few words must be said about this term. In the 1930s, the American Left was a broad-based camp that encompassed a variety of figures like New Deal liberals, Christian socialists, social democrats, Trotskyists and Stalinists. Though commonly attributed to the same camp, these were in fact people of very diverse political stances, to say the least. Some, like Trotskyists and Stalinists, were even bitter rivals. Indeed, it is hard to identify a clear common denominator among the American Left, given that the “Left” itself was a thing in flux during the 1930s.<sup>34</sup> But there was one single factor that brought all of them together – the Great Depression. In the face of the havoc wrought by the Depression, even for the social democrats and New Deal liberals, the ideas of state intervention and central planning, which were being trumpeted by the ongoing first Five-Year Plan in the Soviet Union suddenly all sounded appealing. Niebuhr himself joined the American Socialist Party at the onset of the Depression. Overall, although Niebuhr belonged to the

---

<sup>34</sup> To give but an instance: in this tumultuous period, the well-known American pacifist leader A. J. Muste moved from the Social Gospel (he earned a doctorate from Union in 1913) to Christian Socialism, then to Trotskyism and then back to a sort of Anarcho-Christianity and was later prominent in the anti Vietnam war movement.

Left camp in the early 1930s, and was for some time quite active in the Socialist Party's activities, Niebuhr was never a Trotskyist or Stalinist or a "fellow traveller". He joined the Socialist Party because he saw the Party as a pragmatic means to achieve justice and equality – the synonym for socialism in his eyes at the time. He had hoped that the Socialist Party could turn into a non-dogmatic political organization informed by the Christian prophetic tradition, but such hopes were eventually shattered by the Nazi-Soviet Pact.

Niebuhr was rightly labelled by many as a pragmatist. This does not mean that Niebuhr was one of those pragmatists who claim that an ideology or proposition is true only if it works satisfactorily in the usual philosophical sense. Niebuhr was labelled as a pragmatist because he recognized the complexity of reality and refused to accept any ideologically consistent schemes. Politically, pragmatism, for Niebuhr, meant first and foremost the courage to change when situations changed or previous beliefs were proved wrong. Theologically, in Niebuhr's case, pragmatism meant the opposite of religious perfectionism and absolutism as embodied by Barth's theology.

Niebuhr also earned the misnomer of being a "neo-orthodox" theologian. Neo-orthodoxy is commonly referred to as a recovery of the classical Christian heritage, of which Barth was the most prominent exponent. But Niebuhr himself disliked being associated with neo-orthodoxy because of its rigidity, perfectionism and theological isolationism. Nevertheless, as Niebuhr's theology was built upon his reinterpretation of "sin", a very classical and fundamental concept in the history of Christianity,

commentators normally take it for granted that Niebuhr belongs to the “neo-orthodoxy” camp. However, it is important to remember that although Niebuhr gave special attention to such figures as the Hebrew prophets, Jesus and Paul, Augustine, and the Protestant Reformers Calvin and Luther in his work, Christian realism was anything but orthodoxy. It is true that Niebuhr’s theology also emphasized the partiality and relativity of human values and social forces as Barth did in his own theology. But there exists one big difference between the two on this issue, which is precisely the uniqueness and strength of Niebuhr’s theology. That is, Niebuhr called on Christians to take responsibility for social action and strive for justice despite the fact that all human efforts would be relative and partial. By contrast, the Barthian theology, being too Christocentric and hostile to human values, would only result in irresponsibility and isolationism, and ultimately, irrelevance to human experience.

The term “liberalism” also appears frequently in this study, and as such, it needs clarification as well. As soon as one looks at it, “liberalism” fractures into a variety of types and competing visions. Luckily, unlike other terms in his works, the term “liberalism” was given a clear explanation by Niebuhr himself on a number of occasions. In general, the liberalism that Niebuhr tilted his sword against from 1920s was characterized by a common attitude toward man and society: a sense of optimism and hope; a belief in the perfectibility of man and the manageability of human tensions. Specifically, characteristics of liberalism include the following, as Niebuhr defined it: that injustice is bred by ignorance and will yield to education; that civilization is gradually becoming more moral; that appeals to love, good-will and brotherhood are

bound to be efficacious in the end; that increased knowledge will overcome human selfishness and greed.

### **Major Sources**

As a historical study of “a parson with a journalist urge,” besides consulting his major works, especially books he brought out before 1945, my thesis puts a special emphasis on Niebuhr’s journalistic writings on the Soviet Union during the period under examination.<sup>35</sup> An extremely prolific writer, Niebuhr churned out nearly 2,800 articles, essays, reviews, editorials and other short writings in his life time. These short writings are scattered in more than a dozen religious as well as secular journals and newspapers. An indispensable tool for any study of Niebuhr, D. B. Robertson’s *Reinhold Niebuhr’s Works: A bibliography* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979; rev. ed., Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983) made my initial research – sifting through those journals to locate all of Niebuhr’s writings on my topic – much easier.

My fieldtrip to the United States in 2005 was most critical in collecting relevant materials. As the Reinhold Niebuhr Papers, consisting of some ten thousand items is deposited in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, my research in America started with an exciting forage in the Niebuhr papers. Besides drawing from primary

---

<sup>35</sup> Namely, *Does Civilization Need Religion? A Study of the Social Resources and Limitations of Religion in Modern Life* (1927); *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (1929); *Moral Man and Immoral Society, A Study in Ethics and Politics* (1932); *Reflections on the End of an Era* (1934); *An Interpretation of Christian Ethic* (1935); *Beyond Tragedy, Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (1937); *Christianity and Power Politics* (1940); *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (Volume 1, 1941, Volume II, 1943); *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defense* (1944).

sources like Niebuhr's correspondences with his friends and his lecture outlines that are contained in the Niebuhr papers, my thesis depends heavily on his writings in the following journals: *The New Republic*; *The World Tomorrow*; *The Nation*; *The Christian Century*; *The New Leader*; *Radical Religion (Christianity and Society after 1940)* and *Christianity and Crisis*. The last two journals were particularly vital to my research. My task to track down every piece of Niebuhr's writing on the Soviet Union in these journals and other places also led me to the Burke Library of the Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and the library of the Yale Divinity School. The Sherwood Eddy Papers at Yale were particularly useful in helping me better understand Eddy and Niebuhr's friendship.

Like any dissertation or sustained study of Niebuhr's thought, this one has drawn upon secondary literature. Although Arthur Schlesinger Jr. complained in *The New York Times* in 2005 that the American public has forgotten "the most influential American theologian of the twentieth century," there has been an enormous amount of academic studies on Niebuhr's life and thought since the 1970s.<sup>36</sup> In terms of a general understanding of Niebuhr's life and work, I benefited greatly from two of his biographies (rather conflicting in many aspects), one by Richard Fox, the other by Ronald Stone. In terms of Niebuhr's theology, I found Langdon Gilkey's *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001) extremely illuminating, especially with respect to Niebuhr's approach to myth and meaning. With regard to Niebuhr's understanding of history, his younger brother Richard Niebuhr's article

---

<sup>36</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Forgetting Reinhold Niebuhr", *The New York Times* (September 18, 2005).

“Reinhold Niebuhr’s Interpretation of History” was instrumental in my own construing of Niebuhr’s approach to myth and history.

## Chapter One

### The End of a Decade: 1920s

After working for thirteen years as a pastor in Detroit, Reinhold Niebuhr joined the Union Theological Seminary in New York City in late 1928. This move, facilitated largely by his friend Sherwood Eddy, proved to be a turning point in Niebuhr's career. To a certain extent, Niebuhr's radicalization and rise to prominence in the 1930s can be directly traced to his associations with the Union and intellectuals clustered in the nation's cultural hub. In a sense, therefore, it is fair to say that Niebuhr's departure from his parish in a booming industrial city also marked the end of a decade for the "tamed cynic".<sup>1</sup>

Despite the fact that he did not travel to the Soviet Union until 1930, after moving to New York, Niebuhr became increasingly interested in and reasonably well-informed about the ongoing Russian experiment, thanks to influences from his close friends like Sherwood Eddy and Harry Ward, both being high-profile Soviet sympathizers at the time. With a brief introduction about American intellectuals' attitudes toward the Soviet Union in the 1920s, this chapter serves as the backdrop against which Niebuhr's engagement with what he later described as the "land of extremes" occurred.<sup>2</sup> By analyzing his associations with intellectuals like Ward and Eddy, this chapter also attempts to shed

---

<sup>1</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (New York: Willett, Clark & Colby, 1929).

<sup>2</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Land of Extremes", *The Christian Century*, Vol. 47, No. 42 (Oct. 15, 1930), P. 1241-1243.

light on how prepared Niebuhr was when he embarked on his journey to the Soviet Union amid the deepening Depression.

### **American Intellectuals and the Soviet Union in the 1920s**

Historically, for a variety of reasons, Americans did not show much interest in Russia. In terms of academic study, publications related to Russia in the prestigious *American Historical Review* (AHR) clearly attest to this trend. Up until World War I, only two articles and one documentary publication on Russia found their way into AHR.<sup>3</sup> The lack of interest in Russia on the part of American scholars was also illustrated by the fact that only two American universities - Harvard and Berkeley - offered a course on Russian history before 1914.<sup>4</sup>

As to public interest in Russia, the record was similarly unremarkable. As late as 1944, a time when the Soviet Union fought side by side with America as allies, a survey conducted by the Office of Public Opinion Research at Princeton University revealed that only one American out of ten “is even reasonably well-informed about the Soviet Union.”<sup>5</sup> Americans’ lack of interest in Russia, as this Princeton survey also suggested, was further compounded by skewed information, hence the attitude of the American public toward Russia “reflects feelings more than facts.”<sup>6</sup> That news of Russia appearing

---

<sup>3</sup> Terence Emmons, “Russia Then and Now in the Pages of the American Historical Review and Elsewhere: A Few Centennial Notes”, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 100, No. 4 (Oct., 1995), P. 1138.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Warren B. Walsh, “What the American People Think of Russia”, *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Winter, 1944-1945), P. 522.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., P. 513.

in mainstream American newspapers tended to be slanted on the whole was also a message proved by Walter Lippman and Charles Merz in their research on the *New York Times'* coverage of Russia from 1917 to 1920.<sup>7</sup>

Overall, except for a small picturesque and adventurous group of pro-Soviet American revolutionists like John Reed and Lincoln Steffens, or “poetic journalists and journalistic poets” as they were usually called at the time,<sup>8</sup> Americans did not harbor much real interest in Russia until America got involved in the Russian Civil War and sent out its troops to support the White army. The decade of the 1920s was however a somewhat different story.

The United States witnessed a remarkable economic boom as the Soviet Union unveiled its ‘New Economic Policy’ (1921-28), without which, according to one historian, “the Soviet state would have been overwhelmed by popular rebellions.”<sup>9</sup> With Washington refusing to recognize the Soviet regime, the American public remained as indifferent to the Soviet Union as before as the latter became more stabilized under the moderate policies of the 1920s.<sup>10</sup> But the case with American intellectuals was a different story. The 1920s was in general a time of relative discouragement for liberal intellectuals as the American middle-class tended to fall under the sway of high-riding ambitious business groups.<sup>11</sup> During this period, American liberal and left-wing intelligentsia evinced

---

<sup>7</sup> Walter Lippman and Charles Merz, “A Test of the News”, *The New Republic* (Aug. 4, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> Dimitri von Mohrenschildt, “The Early American Observers of the Russian Revolution, 1917-1921”, *Russian Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Autumn, 1943), P. 65.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Service, *Lenin: A Biography* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), P. 422.

<sup>10</sup> Dimitri von Mohrenschildt, “American Intelligentsia and Russia of the N.E.P.”, *Russian Review*, Vol.6, No.2 (Spring, 1947), P. 59.

<sup>11</sup> Eugene V. Schneider, “American Liberal-Intellectual Attitudes toward the Soviet Union”, *Social Forces*,

steadily increasing interest in Soviet Russia.<sup>12</sup> Disenchanted with the “business civilization” for its business ethic, crassness and obsession with financial success, many American intellectuals felt increasingly alienated from society. Some estranged radicals found themselves isolated from the rest of society as a result of the destruction of socialism in the United States after the First World War.<sup>13</sup>

In sum, a perceptible mood of pessimism and cynicism prevailed among American intellectuals in the 1920s. Under such circumstances, the Soviet Union’s image as “a youthful and energetic society engaged in a stirring industrial and cultural revolution” was simply too irresistible to those sensitive minds.<sup>14</sup> The result was, among other things, that many American intellectuals such as John Dewey and Theodore Dreiser, left behind by their famous European contemporaries like Bertrand Russell, Bernard Shaw and others, all jumped on the bandwagon of touring the Soviet Union to witness the “Great Experiment” in the making. Publications catering to mounting interest in the Soviet Union like the *Liberator*, *The New Masses*, and *Soviet Russia Pictorial* also sprung up. In a word, the Soviet Union during the 1920s and early 30s became the conscience model of the most searching of the world’s intellectuals, not least for American intellectuals.<sup>15</sup>

---

Vol. 27, No. 3 (Mar., 1949), P. 254.

<sup>12</sup> Dimitri von Mohrenschildt, “American Intelligentsia and Russia of the N.E.P.”, P. 59.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York: Knopf, 1969), P.43, P. 47.

<sup>14</sup> Richard H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s & 1950s* (New York: Harper& Row, 1985), 32.

<sup>15</sup> Lewis S. Feuer, “American Travelers to the Soviet Union 1917-1932: The Formation of a Component of New Deal Ideology”, *American Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Part 1, Summer, 1962), P. 120.

## The “Tamed Cynic” in the 1920s

Engulfed by pessimism and cynicism, American intellectuals (those who chose to stay in their homeland instead of expatriating themselves) showed increasing interest in the Soviet Union as America continued to prosper under President Coolidge. It needs to be pointed out, however, for the most part of the 1920s, much of this emerging interest in the USSR was confined to intellectuals in New York City, or to be more specific, in Manhattan’s Greenwich Village.<sup>16</sup>

Preoccupied with his ministry in the booming industrial city, Detroit, Reinhold Niebuhr focused more of his attention on domestic issues (particularly the impact of rapid industrialization as exemplified by the automobile industry) rather than international ones for the most part of the 1920s. Apart from preaching at his own parish and in colleges and universities as a kind of circuit rider, he also served as a member of the Industrial Relations Commission of the Detroit Council of Churches and Chairman of the Mayor’s Commission on Interracial Relations. Niebuhr’s engagement with the Soviet Union did not happen until he moved to New York and became associated with radical intellectuals like Harry Ward, who had already made his pilgrimage to the USSR in the early years of the NEP.

However, this does not imply that Niebuhr was immune from the pervasive pessimism dogging intellectuals at the time. Like those liberals who grew up and matured under the

---

<sup>16</sup> Dimitri von Mohrenschildt, “American Intelligentsia and Russia of the N.E.P.”, *Russian Review*, Vol.6, No.2 (Spring, 1947), P. 61.

sanguine reform atmosphere of the Progressive era, Niebuhr went through disillusionment and was haunted by cynicism in the 1920s as well. He once confessed that the Great War made him “a child of the age of disillusionment”.<sup>17</sup> An apt example of his cynical mood is that the book he brought out at the end of this decade – which was essentially the diary of a young minister preaching in a booming industrial city – bore the title of “*Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*”. Estranged intellectuals in general followed two paths during the 1920s, Eyal Naveh pointed out in his *Reinhold Niebuhr and Non-Utopian Liberalism*, “One path led to constant questioning of every value and meaning without affirmation of any positive alternative. The other path led to the adoption of an alternate outlook as a new synthesis that would give life meaning.”<sup>18</sup> Niebuhr tried out both paths before he made his move to New York. He would continue to experiment with other alternatives “until one by one they proved unavailing” in the years to come.<sup>19</sup>

Overall, a constant search for a radical alternative without abandoning the basic premises of liberal Christianity marked Niebuhr’s thought and activities in the 1920s.<sup>20</sup> While a decade later he would tilt his sword against the windmills he erected in his first book *Does Civilization Need Religion?*(1927), Niebuhr’s effort to bring faith – an ultimate trust in the meaningfulness of life, as he came to define it – to bear upon the social and political problems of contemporary society continued unabatedly. In a sense, Niebuhr’s

---

<sup>17</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “What the War Did to My Mind”, *The Christian Century*, Vol. 45 (Sept. 27, 1928), P. 1161-1163.

<sup>18</sup> Eyal Naveh, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Non-Utopian Liberalism: Beyond Illusion and Despair* (Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2002), P. 13.

<sup>19</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Ten Years That Shook My World”, *The Christian Century*, Vol. 56, No. 17 (Apr. 26, 1939),P. 546.

<sup>20</sup> Eyal Naveh, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Non-Utopian Liberalism*, P. 14.

lifelong endeavor could be characterized as a search for an answer to the crucial question he raised in his first book, namely, does civilization need religion? As early as 1920, Niebuhr already had offered clues to this critical quest. “Religion is poetry,” he observed in his diary, “The truth in the poetry is vivified by adequate poetic symbols.”<sup>21</sup> Writing in the foreword to a collection of his colleague’s early writings, John Bennett testified that “Niebuhr’s life-long struggle” is “to express his faith in relation to both ‘mystery and meaning’.”<sup>22</sup> To some extent, Niebuhr’s engagement with the Soviet Union in the following decade, as next chapter will show, was precisely prompted by his endless quest for meaning in light of a challenged Christian faith.

Indeed, a firm trust in the meaningfulness of life, a constant search for pragmatic means to assert the meaning of life in the face of adversity, an acute sense of the fact that life is perennially enveloped in mystery, these constitute the main themes that underpin much of Niebuhr’s works. Bearing this in mind, we shall be able to understand better why Niebuhr became intrigued by the “Russian enigma”, and why he would later define communism as “religion”, a “religion” which posed unprecedented challenge to Christianity.

---

<sup>21</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1980), P. 30.

<sup>22</sup> John Bennett, *Foreword*, in William G. Chrystal ed., *Young Reinhold Niebuhr: His Early Writings, 1911-1931* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1977), P. 15.

## The Move to New York

Reinhold Niebuhr left Detroit to take up a teaching position at the Union Theological Seminary in late 1928. It is noteworthy that this job at the prestigious seminary in the metropolis was secured for him by his friend Sherwood Eddy, the tireless American evangelist who visited Russia fifteen times in his lifetime (of which, thirteen times were under the Soviet regime).<sup>23</sup> Eddy himself provided Niebuhr's first years' salary for this job. Later he would also arrange for Niebuhr's two-week tour of the Soviet Union which became one of the most important events of the latter's life. I will discuss the friendship between Eddy and Niebuhr later.

When Niebuhr arrived at the Union, the spirit of Social Gospel still held sway. As Niebuhr recollected in an article entitled *A Third of a Century at Union Seminary*, "My three decades at the Seminary can be roughly divided into three or four periods...The first period is that of the 'Social Gospel'. It was in full swing when I arrived at the Seminary in 1928."<sup>24</sup> Against this background, aside from teaching at the Union, editing the *World Tomorrow*, which was founded by the Fellowship of Reconciliation in 1918,<sup>25</sup> Niebuhr associated frequently with John Haynes Holmes, Edmund Chaffee, Norman Thomas and other members of New York's Protestant-Socialist nexus as the 1920s stumbled to a close.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Sherwood Eddy, *Eighty Adventurous Years* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955), P. 134.

<sup>24</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "A Third of a Century at Union Seminary", *The Union Seminary Tower* (May 1960), P. 3.

<sup>25</sup> David A. Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America: A History* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), P. 191.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), P. 112.

After moving to New York, Niebuhr also churned out much more writing on secular as well as religious topics. A quick survey of his publications before and after moving to New York shows that prior to 1928, Niebuhr produced an average of less than ten short pieces a year for mainly Christian journals, while starting from 1928 up through the 30s, that number more than tripled. In some years, he wrote as many as seventy pieces a year (take, for example, the years of 1936 to 38).<sup>27</sup> It is worth stressing that these short pieces were written outside his teaching duty at the Union and he also produced several books in the 1930s.

Clearly, moving to the nation's intellectual hub marked a new chapter in Niebuhr's career. When it came to cultural and intellectual richness, New York of the 1920s was in a class of its own. No other American city, therefore, could be more congenial to an ambitious "parson with a journalist urge." Quick associations with intellectuals in this dynamic environment, particularly his radical colleagues at the Union, undoubtedly spurred Niebuhr to follow the political scenes closely and to express himself more forcefully while teaching in the ivory tower. Another reason for Niebuhr's outburst of energy was apparently linked to the eventful era itself. Shortly after Niebuhr settled into his job at the Union, the Great Depression hit America. As he recounted, "The great depression began in 1929... It drove many perilously near to or into Stalinist Marxism. It raised questions in the minds of many of us about the adequacy of an identification of the Gospel with utopia."<sup>28</sup> Already a staunch supporter of the Socialist Presidential candidate

---

<sup>27</sup> D.B. Robertson, *Reinhold Niebuhr's Works: A Bibliography* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983).

<sup>28</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "A Third of a Century at Union Seminary", *The Union Seminary Tower*; P. 3.

Norman Thomas in the 1928 Presidential election, Niebuhr promptly signed his Socialist Party membership card at the onset of the Great Depression.

In his biography of Niebuhr, Richard Fox speculated that “Norman Thomas’s personal charisma may have been the primary magnet that drew Niebuhr toward the Socialist Party.”<sup>29</sup> While the six-time Presidential candidate’s charisma may be enormous, to attribute Niebuhr’s leaning toward the Socialist cause to a single person, instead of taking into account the backdrop against which Niebuhr made his decision, seems to me to be overly simplistic. By contrast, another Niebuhr’s biographer, Ronald Stone, gave a much better and more extensive analysis explaining Niebuhr’s gravitation toward the Socialist Party and Marxism: “...for approximately a decade, the social context of the Depression, the previous experience of industrial Detroit, and the intellectual context of New York City socialism meant that Marxism would become a major conversation partner for Niebuhr.”<sup>30</sup>

However, Stone’s analysis itself is not exhaustive either. “The spectacle of human suffering did not in itself account for the widespread radicalization of the American intelligentsia”, John Diggins suggested. “The Depression made poverty more visible, but it was communism that made it intolerable.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, to American intellectuals like Niebuhr, the poverty and misery brought about by the Depression rendered capitalism all the more evil and, at the same time, made communism all the more attractive. The lure of the Great Experiment in Communist Russia, therefore, was clearly

---

<sup>29</sup> Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, P. 116.

<sup>30</sup> Ronald Stone, *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr: A Mentor to the Twentieth Century*, P. 84.

<sup>31</sup> John Patrick Diggins, *The Rise and Fall of the American Left* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), P. 149.

another significant contributing factor to Niebuhr's engagement with Marxism and the socialist cause.

The reason is really not hard to fathom. In the face of a stark contrast between debilitating stagnation at home and an ongoing enthusiastic new-society building movement in the Soviet Union, Niebuhr's search for an alternative to capitalism took on increasing urgency. As a "concrete example of effective social and economic planning, a true proletarian democracy, a powerful nation guided by wise leaders who pragmatically applied Marxist principles", the Soviet Union, for Niebuhr, as for many intellectuals sympathetic with the plight of the uprooted and unemployed, seemed to offer a very attractive and workable alternative.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, given Niebuhr's penchant for myth as evinced in his theology, the appeal of Russia, which, in Winston Churchill's words, was "a myth wrapped in enigma", proved too fascinating for him to ignore, so much so that he would eagerly start his own fact-finding journey to this country shortly after he joined the Socialist Party.

In his book *Workers' Paradise Lost*, Eugene Lyons, at one time the United Press correspondent in Moscow but later a virulent anti-communist, relentlessly debunked twenty-one myths concerning Russia as his "verdict of five decades." "Soviet Russia," Lyons wrote, "is the one country in which both its history and its present condition add up to a vast mythology."<sup>33</sup> The decade of the 1930s would witness Niebuhr coming to

---

<sup>32</sup> Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age*, P. 33.

<sup>33</sup> Eugene Lyons, *Worker's Paradise Lost: Fifty Years of Soviet Communism* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1967), P. 24. That Russia is enigmatic was also a prominent theme of American news reporting about Soviet Russia, as represented by the most authoritative newspaper in the United States, the *New York Times*,

grips with the myths of Russia, or the Russian enigma in his own way, until one by one they were deflated. But before turning to Niebuhr's engagement with the Soviet Union in the 1930s, I need to single out two important figures for consideration, because as it will become much clearer later, these two persons not only played significant roles in radicalizing Niebuhr, but also prepared the latter for his momentous journey to the Soviet Union in 1930.

### **Niebuhr and Harry Ward**

Convinced that "the Soviets had Christianized their economic order," Ward was allegedly the best-known sympathizer of the Soviet Union in the American Protestant circle.<sup>34</sup>

Some even dubbed him the "model of a model fellow-traveller".<sup>35</sup>

Appalled by the oppression of capitalism in his Chicago stockyards parish, attracted by the Marxist analysis of capitalism, Ward began to sympathize with the Soviet cause in the years following the October Revolution. After teaching for five years at the Boston University School of Theology, he joined the Union in 1918. In his sabbatical year 1924-1925, Ward made his first trip to the Soviet Union in the last leg of his world tour (India and China were his other two destinations). Ward spent a month there investigating the question of political liberties. He came away with the belief that

---

see Martin Kriesberg, "Soviet News in the New York Times", *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Winter, 1946-1947), P. 541, P. 547.

<sup>34</sup> David Nelson Duke, *Christianity and Marxism in the Life and Thought of Harry F. Ward*, PhD dissertation, Emory University, 1980, I.

<sup>35</sup> David Caute, *The Fellow-Travelers: Intellectual Friends of Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), P. 256.

suppression of opposition was a necessary policy of self-protection, not vengeance.<sup>36</sup> In 1931, Ward embarked on his journey to witness the Great Experiment again. This time he spent nearly a year in the Soviet Union living with the peasants and workers alike to inspect the new society first-hand. One product of this journey was his book *In Place of Profit: Social Incentives in the Soviet Union*, what Ward himself called a book of “personal necessity” after his many years of analyzing the motivation of the capitalist society.<sup>37</sup> In this book, Ward drew the conclusion that the social incentives in the Soviet Union were succeeding remarkably well in displacing the old profit motivation.

Steeped in the Social Gospel heritage, Ward stood apart from other American Protestant leaders in giving his consistent support to the Soviet Union and his unrelenting attempt to fuse the philosophy of Marx and the religion of Jesus. For example, he was the only clerical sponsor of the American Society for Cultural Relations with Russia.<sup>38</sup> Ward stood virtually alone in the Protestant circle after 1939 when others discarded Marxism and its Soviet manifestation.<sup>39</sup>

Observing Ward’s influence on Niebuhr in his biography of the latter, Ronald Stone rightly pointed out that “The association with Ward and Union radicalized Niebuhr.”<sup>40</sup> In his first year at the Union, besides teaching a course called *Religion and Ethic*, Niebuhr

---

<sup>36</sup> Dimitri von Mohrenschildt, “American Intelligentsia and Russia of the N.E.P.,” *Russian Review*, Vol.6, No.2 (Spring, 1947), P. 65.

<sup>37</sup> Duke, *Christianity and Marxism in the Life and Thought of Harry F. Ward*, P. 75.

<sup>38</sup> Donald B. Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919-1941* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), P. 189.

<sup>39</sup> Duke, *Christianity and Marxism in the Life and Thought of Harry F. Ward*, P. 1.

<sup>40</sup> Ronald H. Stone, *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr: A Mentor to the Twentieth Century*, P. 55.

had to work as an assistant to Ward in Ethics.<sup>41</sup> Niebuhr would continue to co-teach some courses with Ward for several years, until their class collaboration ended in academic year 1933-34.<sup>42</sup>

It is not surprising at all that the two would get along so well in their collaboration in both teaching and other political activities (for example, both belonged to the socialist-oriented organization the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order). Both men were raised in the Social Gospel heritage and imbibed Protestant liberalism as they came of age. They also shared a passion for social justice and were both prolific writers. Like Niebuhr, Ward worked as a pastor for more than a decade (fourteen years to be exact, thirteen years in Niebuhr's case) in Chicago after he got his MA degree in Philosophy under the guidance of William James in Harvard. Both men had exuberant energy and gave themselves unstintingly to public speaking and organizational work for social reform movements.<sup>43</sup> Although he never fully shared with Ward's political views, prolonged collaboration with a well-known fellow-traveller undoubtedly helped provoke Niebuhr's interest in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s.

“Observing them together in 1963,” Stone wrote of these two Union professors, “I found their relations amicable, and the greatest ethical difference between them was their alternative readings of the Soviet Union.”<sup>44</sup> Divergent as their stances toward the Soviet Union were to become in the Cold War era, Ward was among those who eagerly

---

<sup>41</sup> Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, P. 112.

<sup>42</sup> Stone, *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr: A Mentor to the Twentieth Century*, P. 55.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

introduced Niebuhr to the “land of promise” in the former’s eyes. Niebuhr was never an unqualified fellow-traveller, as David Cate made it clear in his book *The Fellow Travellers*.<sup>45</sup> But if “fellow-travelling involves commitment at a distance which is not only geographical but also emotional and intellectual” as Cate defined it, Niebuhr certainly fit squarely into this “remote-control radicalism”.<sup>46</sup> Ward clearly played a great role in bringing Niebuhr closer to this remote-control radicalism as Stone pointed out.

It is a pity that although he used to be regarded as an influential leader in groups sympathetic to Marxism, “Ward seems to be unknown to Marxist-Christian conversations” today, partly due to “Reinhold Niebuhr’s grip on American Christian political thought.”<sup>47</sup> Not exactly a fellow-traveller, Niebuhr could probably be best described as one of what George Orwell once termed as “the fellow-travellers of the fellow-travellers.” Held back by his perennial skepticism about any kind of dogma, Niebuhr stopped short of becoming a fellow-traveller, yet the influence of “the model of fellow-traveller” on him was undoubtedly undeniable.<sup>48</sup>

### **Niebuhr and Sherwood Eddy**

Another important figure is Sherwood Eddy. Niebuhr journeyed to the Soviet Union to make sense of the Russian enigma in 1930. But he did not start this trip with overflowing enthusiasm typical of many of his starry-eyed contemporaries. Nor was he moon-struck

---

<sup>45</sup> Cate, *The Fellow-Travelers*, P. 256.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Duke, *Christianity and Marxism in the Life and Thought of Harry F. Ward*. Iiii.

<sup>48</sup> Cate, *The Fellow-Travelers*, P. 4.

about the Great Experiment once he witnessed it at first hand as some American travellers to the Soviet Union at that time tended to be. Part of the reason, I suggest, lay in his association with Sherwood Eddy, whose extensive knowledge and balanced view of Russia well prepared Niebuhr about the advantages and disadvantages of the Russian experiment before he set foot on Russian soil.

Eddy, the indefatigable evangelist who brought Niebuhr to the Union in 1928, was during his prime, “one of the giant movers and shakers in American Protestantism.”<sup>49</sup> As one of the leading figures in American Protestantism before the outbreak of World War II, Eddy not only influenced countless numbers to undertake mission work, but also “affected the lives of key Protestant figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – perhaps most notably Reinhold Niebuhr.”<sup>50</sup>

However, as Eddy’s biographer Rick Nutt lamented, this renowned figure in American Protestantism is “currently most often relegated to footnote references or mentioned only in relation to two of his most famous colleagues, Kirby Page and Reinhold Niebuhr.”<sup>51</sup> The reason, Nutt reckoned, is partly because Eddy did little original writing and his work was extremely “impressionistic and anecdotal.”<sup>52</sup> Reviewers of Eddy’s works tend to agree with this.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Jill K. Gill, Book Review of *The Whole Gospel for the Whole World: Sherwood Eddy and the American Protestant Mission* (by Rick L. Nutt), *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 86, No. 3 (Dec., 1999), P. 1352.

<sup>50</sup> Rick L. Nutt, *The Whole Gospel for the Whole World: Sherwood Eddy and the American Protestant Mission* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), Introduction.

<sup>51</sup> Rick L. Nutt, “G. Sherwood Eddy and the Attitudes of Protestants in the United States toward Global Mission”, *Church History*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (Sep., 1997), P. 502.

<sup>52</sup> Nutt, *The Whole Gospel for the Whole World*, P. 3.

<sup>53</sup> For example, John Heath wrote that Eddy’s *Russia Today* “should be regarded as a compilation and

Nevertheless, that Eddy played a significant role in Niebuhr's career is beyond doubt. Niebuhr acknowledged the profound influence that Eddy had on his life in his introduction to the latter's autobiography *Eighty Adventurous Years*.<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, before he published his autobiography, Eddy originally wanted Niebuhr to be his biographer.<sup>55</sup> Although he declined this opportunity, as a sign of his gratitude to Eddy, Niebuhr emphasized Eddy's critical role in bringing him to the Union in his own intellectual autobiography.<sup>56</sup> However, gauging Eddy's influence on Niebuhr is out of the scope of my thesis. Instead, I will only focus on their attitudes toward Russia and how Eddy's thoughts influenced Niebuhr in this regard.

After graduating from Yale University in 1891, Eddy worked for the Young Men's Christian Association (Y.M.C.A) and Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions in New York City until 1896. During this period, Eddy also attended the Union Theological Seminary in New York and Princeton Theological Seminary. From 1896 through 1931 when he retired from Y.M.C.A, Eddy worked as a high-profile travelling evangelist, roaming numerous countries in Europe, Asia, and last but not least, Russia.

Eddy made his first visit to Russia in 1910, a time under the Czar when the Russian nobility "dined and danced and caroused over the exploited bodies of the people."<sup>57</sup> In

---

classification of existing material rather than as an original contribution to our understanding of the Russian Question". *International Affairs*, Vol. 13, No. 6, P. 878.

<sup>54</sup> Sherwood Eddy, *Eighty Adventurous Years*, P. 9.

<sup>55</sup> Nutt, *The Whole Gospel for the Whole World*, Preface.

<sup>56</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Intellectual Autobiography", in Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), P. 8.

<sup>57</sup> Eddy, *Eighty Adventurous Years*, P. 134.

1920, he produced his first book on Russia, *Everybody's World*, which became one of the most widely read reports on revolutionary Russia and favourable to the Bolshevik regime at the time.<sup>58</sup> In this book, Eddy expressed his pious hope about Russia: “With all our heart we still believe in Russia. We believe in her, because we believe in humanity, because we believe in God.”<sup>59</sup> Subsequently, another three books and pamphlets on Russia resulted from his extensive travels to Russia: *Russia: A Warning and A Challenge* (1923); *The Challenge of Russia* (1931); *Russia Today: What Can We Learn From It?* (1934).

Like many, Eddy was once fascinated by Russia. In *The Challenge of Russia* and *Russia Today*, he painted a picture of a new society engaged in an unprecedented vigorous self-construction in human history. At the heart of this society, which was being transformed by the ambitious Five-Year Plans, lay a strong determination, pulling all its parts together, infusing them with a single social passion. Communist Russia constituted a great challenge to people living in the free world. Part of the reason, Eddy explained (with perceptible admiration), was that “Russia has achieved what has hitherto been known only at rare periods in history, the experience of almost a whole people living under a unified philosophy of life. All life is focused on a central purpose. It is directed to a single high end and energized by such powerful and growing motivation that life seems to have supreme significance.”<sup>60</sup> That life in Russia acquired a “central purpose” and therefore took on “supreme significance” was clearly what appealed the most to

---

<sup>58</sup> Dimitri von Mohrenschildt, “The Early American Observers of the Russian Revolution, 1917-1921”, *Russian Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Autumn, 1943), P. 65.

<sup>59</sup> Sherwood Eddy, *Everybody's World* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1920), P. 204.

<sup>60</sup> Sherwood Eddy, *Russia Today: What Can We Learn From It?* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1934), P. 179.

Eddy. In a word, for Eddy (as well as for Niebuhr), Russia ultimately not only symbolized justice, brotherhood and a new social ethic, but also embodied meaning in life.<sup>61</sup>

Captivated by the Russian experiment though he was, Eddy did not succumb to the lure of communism. On the contrary, he remained a seasoned critic of communism throughout. Looking back on his numerous trips to Russia, Eddy once declared categorically that “I am not, I never could be, a Communist. Because of the persistent evils in the system, even more evident today than they were two decades ago, that position is for me a moral impossibility.”<sup>62</sup> The abuses and evils of communism were constantly on Eddy’s mind as he travelled through Soviet Russia, so much so that he once wrote to Niebuhr about this while he was on the Black Sea during his 1929 trip.

In 1923, Niebuhr became acquainted with Eddy on one of the European tours that the latter conducted after the First World War.<sup>63</sup> As an effort to bring American educators and lecturers to Europe for the exchange of ideas with European political leaders and other influential figures, Eddy launched what came to be known as the American Seminar in 1921. Concerned about America’s conservatism and isolationism, Eddy hoped this seminar could provide “one avenue to international understanding and peace.”<sup>64</sup> The Seminar became so well known in major European cities that members of the groups were often invited to functions in the American embassies or other cultural and

---

<sup>61</sup> Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919-1941*, P. 193.

<sup>62</sup> Eddy, *Eighty Adventurous Years*, P. 143.

<sup>63</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Introduction”, in *Eighty Adventurous Years*, P. 9.

<sup>64</sup> Eddy, *Eighty Adventurous Years*, P. 128.

government affair in the host country.<sup>65</sup> It was the 1930 American Seminar that brought Niebuhr to the Soviet Union.

The American Seminar did not extend to the Soviet Union until 1926. From 1929 it ran annually till the outbreak of the Second World War. Of all the seminar trips that Eddy made, he was most influenced by his trips to the Soviet Union, which he referred to almost exclusively as Russia.<sup>66</sup> Obviously, the Soviet regime attached considerable importance to these exchanges at the beginning, for in the first seminar, prominent Soviet political figures like Chicherin, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Lunacharsky, Minister of Education both held talks with the Seminar members. One member, Jerome Davis, who spoke Russian, even obtained an interview with Stalin.<sup>67</sup>

Equally apparent was that the atmosphere of those early seminars was quite lively and open. Eddy fondly remembered one session in the 1926 seminar as “one of the most interesting and enlightening discussions I have ever known.”<sup>68</sup> In that seminar, Eddy and his colleagues openly challenged the Russian leaders in a dialogue about what they saw as the chief evils or defects in the Soviet system. They singled out four evils of Russian communism that were to figure prominently later in Eddy’s letters to Niebuhr, namely, the totalitarian dictatorship with its severe abridgment of liberty; the policy of a violent world revolution; the opposition to religion; the ruthless international relationships.<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> Nutt, *The Whole Gospel for the Whole World*, P. 204.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, P. 207, P. 210.

<sup>67</sup> Eddy, *Eighty Adventurous Years*, P. 135.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, P. 139.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

Following the successful inauguration of the American Seminar in Russia, Eddy set out for the second one in 1929. During this trip he sent back three letters to Niebuhr, filling his friend in on the unfolding First Five-Year Plan. The first letter dealt with Russia's economic progress and the significance of the issue of recognition. In the second one Eddy described his impressions of the sweeping collectivization of agriculture. The third letter, which was seven pages long, summarized his "outstanding impressions of this baffling 'land of contradictions'."<sup>70</sup> Later in his own Leningrad dispatch to *The Christian Century*, Niebuhr would echo Eddy's impressions by using the title, "*The Land of Extremes*".<sup>71</sup> Overall, comparing conditions under the First Five-Year Plan with prevailing ones on his last visit in 1926, when Russia was still under NEP, Eddy found three aspects particularly striking: collective farming was rapidly developing; defensive militarism was growing fast; religious persecution was developing.<sup>72</sup>

The sheer magnitude of the Plan and the Russian people's enthusiasm in building a new society clearly imprinted themselves deeply on Eddy's mind. "Russia has a wonderful plan of the whole, with titanic achievement against terrific odds," Eddy told his friend. As to the Russian people, "I stand amazed at their enthusiasm and their eager sacrifice". Among other things, the Soviet system also possesses the following elements of value, Eddy reminded Niebuhr: their passion for social justice; the training of youth in service and citizenship; the value of a world laboratory of social experiment. Yet for all its values, the Soviet system's defects were also glaring. Echoing the points he made in his

---

<sup>70</sup> Sherwood Eddy to Reinhold Niebuhr, Sept. 15, 1929, Reinhold Niebuhr Papers, Box 5.

<sup>71</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Land of Extremes", *The Christian Century*, Vol. 47, No. 42 (Oct. 15, 1930), P. 1241-1243.

<sup>72</sup> Eddy to Niebuhr, Sept. 15, 1929, Niebuhr Papers.

1926 seminar, Eddy brought the following to Niebuhr's attention: dictatorship as contrasted with democracy and the consequent denial of liberty for many; the evils of destructive revolution as contrasted with constructive evolution; the persecution of religion.<sup>73</sup> Eddy also expressed his concern over the religious persecution in his letter to another old friend, Raymond Robin on this trip.<sup>74</sup>

Last but not least, in this long and informative letter, Eddy also brought up one important subject that would weigh heavily on Niebuhr's mind for years to come, that is, the relationship between Christianity and Communism. Eddy listed seven similarities and differences between the two.<sup>75</sup> Here as on other occasions, Eddy viewed Communism as a religion, or "a passionate, fanatical, sacrificial faith, as much as Islam ever was".<sup>76</sup> Consequently, he arrived at the conclusion that Russia constituted both "a warning and a challenge seriously to apply the principles of our religion to life."<sup>77</sup> Shortly after his return from the Soviet Union, Niebuhr himself would openly address the challenge of communism as religion in the *Atlantic Monthly*.<sup>78</sup> As it will become clear later, on this topic, Niebuhr and Eddy were basically on the same page.

In some ways, Niebuhr's realistic theology could be seen as a direct response to communism's challenge to Christianity as a form of religion. While it is hard to decide what role Eddy's views about Russia, especially his comparison of Christianity and

---

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Eddy, *Eighty Adventurous Years*, P. 141.

<sup>75</sup> Eddy to Niebuhr, Sept. 15, 1929.

<sup>76</sup> Eddy, *Eighty Adventurous Years*, P. 145.

<sup>77</sup> Eddy to Niebuhr, Sept. 15, 1929.

<sup>78</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Religion of Communism", *The Atlantic Monthly* (April, 1931), P. 462-470.

communism played in the evolution of Niebuhr's political and theological thoughts, those sobering observations recorded in private letters clearly left their marks on an impressionable mind. In any event, Eddy's rich experiences with Russia, especially his involvement in the American Seminar greatly helped prepare Niebuhr for his own participation in the 1930 Seminar, which I shall turn to in the following chapter.

## Chapter Two

### A Trip to the Soviet Union: Early 1930s

Amid the Depression, like many Americans on the Left, Niebuhr went to the Soviet Union to see Socialist reconstruction firsthand in the autumn of 1930. But unlike some fellow-travellers such as Harry Ward and Sidney Hook, Niebuhr didn't treat this trip as a sort of "pilgrimage." In fact, prior to this trip, Niebuhr had declined a couple of times since 1925, Sherwood Eddy's entreaty that he accompany the American Seminar group to the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr didn't change his thinking radically because of the 1930 trip, the highlight of which comprised visits to factories, collective farms and churches. Nevertheless, this trip proved an unforgettable experience for Niebuhr, so much so that he even called it one of the greatest events in his life. As reflected in his correspondences during the trip, Niebuhr was deeply impressed by the enthusiasm with which the Russian people were building a "brand new" society. This enthusiasm, or fanaticism in some cases, was also what impacted Niebuhr the most on this trip. The immense spiritual power that communism unleashed drove Niebuhr to rethink the nature of religion – he came to understand faith as a trust in the meaningfulness of life shortly after the trip. Viewing communism as a powerful mythology, he also went on to develop the central theme in his theology, namely, myth and meaning.

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, P. 123.

Another aspect that is worth noting about this trip is Niebuhr's attitude towards Stalinism. Niebuhr was never a follower of Stalinism, or Trotskyism or dogmatism of any sort. When Niebuhr visited the Soviet Union, the myth of the dictatorship of the proletariat had not been deflated. As a result, though he was aware of some of the brutalities of the Soviet regime, Niebuhr still seemed willing to give Stalin the benefit of doubt. On some occasions, he even praised Stalin's political chicanery of tacking between right and left wing policy as "realism". It was not until the late 1930s that Niebuhr totally grasped the nature of Stalinism: the so-called champion of workers' cause was nothing but a brutal regime intent on imposing its will on its people, hence his declaration of "An End to Illusions."<sup>2</sup>

### **An Unforgettable Trip**

At the end of the 1920s, the Soviet Union's New Economic Policy (NEP), a policy intended by Lenin to phase out "War Communism" and reintroduce capitalist practices in the economic field was ended abruptly by Stalin. Having trampled upon the NEP "like an angry bull," Stalin introduced a massive five-year building and construction program in 1928, in a bid to transform the Soviet Union from a poor agricultural state into a first-rate industrial nation.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "An End to Illusions", *The Nation*, Vol.150, No.26 (June 29, 1940).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Service, *Stalin: A Biography* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2005), P. 253.

Although Stalin did not have specific projects in mind when rolling out new policies in 1928, the agenda behind the ambitious plan was crystal clear.<sup>4</sup> It was made clear passionately by Stalin in a speech to a conference of Soviet industrial officials and managers:

...And the backward gets beaten. We don't want to be beaten. No, that's not what we want. The history of old Russia consisted, among other things, in her being ceaselessly beaten for her backwardness. She was beaten by the Mongol Khans. She was beaten by the Turkish beys. She was beaten by the Swedish feudal rulers. She was beaten by the Polish-Lithuanian lords. She was beaten by the Anglo-French capitalists. She was beaten by the Japanese barons. Everyone gave her a beating for her backwardness....<sup>5</sup>

The message that “the backward gets beaten” struck a chord with the audience and galvanized the Russian public through the propagandizing of *Pravda*. Its unmistakable emotional intensity and patriotic appeal were subsequently injected into the First Five Year Plan. If beating the backward was the law of the exploiters, then the solution for a backward Russia was irresistible, Stalin declared:

We have fallen behind the advanced countries by fifty to a hundred years. We must close that gap in ten years. Either we do this or we'll be crushed. This is what our obligations before the workers and peasants of the USSR dictate to us.<sup>6</sup>

Such was the objective of the Five-Year Plan – to catch up with the West within a decade so as not to be beaten again. However unrealistic and overtly political as the colossal Five-Year Plan might seem in retrospect, its enormous appeal to Westerners mired in the Depression is easy to imagine. To many in the West, the prospect of abolishing the profit

---

<sup>4</sup> Robert Service, *A History of Modern Russia: From Nicholas II to Vladimir Putin* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005), P. 171.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Service, *Stalin: A Biography*, P. 272.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

motive, equality of income, and above all, a centralized social and economic planning, as conjured by the Five-Year Plan clearly suggested a way out of the economic impasse that was besieging the capitalist nations.

Although American liberals were generally sympathetic to Russia during the 1920s, they did not feel its impact directly. The Crash at home, coupled with the ongoing First Five Year Plan from afar, sparked an upsurge of interest in the Soviet Union on the part of American Left in the early 1930s. Travelling to the Soviet Union to get a sense of what America's best-known Russia expert, George Kennan called "the romance of economic development" became much more popular than it was in the 1920s.<sup>7</sup> American intellectuals, in particular, figured prominently in this buzz. For example, of the thirteen editors of the well-known liberal journal *The New Republic* in 1932, five had already travelled to the Soviet Union and filed their salutary reports of the Soviet experiment – Bruce Bliven, John Dewey, E.C. Lindermann, Waldo Frank and R.G. Tugwell.<sup>8</sup> According to one historian, during 1930, approximately 5,000 Americans travelled through the USSR, twice the number in 1929, while the figure shot up to 10,000 in 1931.<sup>9</sup> As a result, a deluge of articles and books about Russia ensued in early 1930s. Edmund Wilson, the famous journalist and literary critic captured this mood in an article that produced an immense commotion within liberal and radical circles:

---

<sup>7</sup> David C. Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore: American Intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), P. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis, S. Feuer, "American Travelers to the Soviet Union 1917-1932: The Formation of a Component of New Deal Ideology", *American Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 2 ( part 1, Summer, 1962), P. 146.

<sup>9</sup> Peter G. Filene, ed., *American Views of Soviet Russia, 1917-1965* (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press, 1968), P. 78.

The apparent success of the Five Year Plan has affected the morale of all the rest of the world – and of the Americans surely not least. In the course of this winter of our capitalist quandary, the Soviets have emerged from the back pages of the newspapers and are now to be seen all over the place – even to interviews with Stalin’s mother. And behind the reports of even the reactionary papers one feels as much admiration as resentment.<sup>10</sup>

It was amid this kind of atmosphere that Niebuhr, after attending the American Seminar in Berlin, finally embarked on his own journey to the Soviet Union in mid-August 1930. However, it is worth noting that Niebuhr did not start this trip with the typical overflowing enthusiasm of some of his contemporaries. Instead, along the way, perhaps with Sherwood Eddy’s sobering remarks regarding the flip side of Russian communism at the back of his mind, he exhibited a remarkably clear-headed attitude toward the Soviet Union on this trip, a sharp contrast to fellow-travellers who were overwhelmed by the grandeur of the Great Experiment.

In this regard, the experience of Sidney Hook, a prominent Marxist-turned-anti-communist, serves as a great example. Writing home from Moscow about his first visit to the Soviet Union in 1929, Hook apparently could not suppress his excitement:

This is Moscow – bizarre and gorgeous – a city of startling contrasts – carrying ugly scars of the past and seeds of the future.

Food is mean and clothes are rather shabby – but every brick, every road, every machine is a symbol of the new spirit. I have seen no Potemkin villages. Just mingling with the people has enabled me to tap views of enthusiasm that run deep under the surface of things. And just think of it! A country in which the red flag is the national banner and the “International” is the national anthem.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, P. 47.

<sup>11</sup> Edward S. Shapiro, ed., *Letters of Sidney Hook: Democracy, Communism and the Cold War* (Amonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1995), P. 20.

Hook's effusive remarks were typical of reports coming out of the Soviet Union from American visitors at that time. Even Hook's famous teacher, John Dewey, with whom Niebuhr would engage in numerous polemics in later years, was deeply impressed by the Soviet regime's achievements. The towering figure in American pragmatic thought found nearly the fulfilment of his philosophic hopes in the Great Experiment.<sup>12</sup> Russian people's effort, Dewey observed in *The New Republic* in 1928, was "nobly heroic, evincing a faith in human nature which is democratic beyond the ambitions of the democracies of the past."<sup>13</sup> No wonder the theologian who "rediscovered" sin would take the optimistic philosopher to task.

Niebuhr's own trip to the Soviet Union was basically recorded in his five pieces in *The Christian Century*, plus one dispatch to *The New Leader* when he returned to Berlin from Moscow. Overall, these editorials illustrate that Niebuhr was unquestionably infected by the Russian people's outpouring of enthusiasm in embracing the Five Year Plan. Nevertheless, his attitude toward the Five Year Plan was not wholly uncritical, whether with regard to rapid industrialization or sweeping collectivization in agriculture. In fact, he remained very skeptical when it came to the problem of efficiency in both fields. As a theologian, Niebuhr was understandably very concerned with the state of religion in a country ruled by a hostile atheistic government. Believing religion lies at the root of any great social enterprise, he claimed that the "machine" or "industrialization" assumed the role of religion in Russia. Niebuhr's last dispatch, entitled "The Land of Extremes", adequately summarized his own impressions of the "land of promise" in the eyes of many

---

<sup>12</sup> Lewis, S. Feuer, "American Travelers to the Soviet Union 1917-1932", P. 122.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

American radicals. He came away with an unsettling feeling that enthusiasm and fanaticism in Russia were perhaps the different sides of the same coin. In the years that followed, this idea would weigh more and more heavily on his mind as he came to grips with the challenge of communism as a form of “religion”.

As mentioned, prepared though he was about the magnitude of the First Five-Year Plan, once caught up in the vortex of the Great Experiment, Niebuhr found it hard not to be touched by the vitality of Russian society, especially at a time when the Depression was casting a pall over the western world. In his first dispatch, he observed that although visitors to Russia have heard a lot about how the Five Year Plan was being enthusiastically carried out, “What the visitor is not prepared for is the unanimity and the depth of the enthusiasm with which this program has been launched.”<sup>14</sup> Russian people’s “enthusiasm”, “energy” and “vigor” – his correspondence was strewn with such words and clearly these qualities impressed Niebuhr the most on this trip. So much so that he felt that “the superficial impressions which visitors carry home will however not do justice to the energy and enthusiasm with which Russia is following out its program.”<sup>15</sup> Sounding a little carried away, he even declared that “If energy alone were to determine the issue between Russia and the rest of the world, one could, without further ado or doubt, predict the victory of Russia.”<sup>16</sup> In a word, the Russian experiment was, Niebuhr

---

<sup>14</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia Makes Machine Its God”, *The Christian Century*, Vol. 47, No. 36 (Sept. 10, 1930), P. 1080.

<sup>15</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Glimpses From Soviet Russia”, *The New Leader*, Vol. 11, No. 7 (Sept. 13, 1930), P. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russian Efficiency”, *The Christian Century*, Vol. 47, No. 40 (Oct 1, 1930), P. 1178.

observed, “so vast that it staggers the imagination,” and “Russia has really entered a new era.”<sup>17</sup>

However, Niebuhr’s first impressions of Russia were not all that positive. The streets in Moscow were dirty, pot-holed and crowded. The shortage of goods was obviously endemic, for there were meandering queues before all the stores. Yet despite the drabness of the city, “this first impression begins to disappear, or is at least greatly altered,” Niebuhr wrote, “as one begins to get in touch with the people and to appreciate some of the factors which enter into the present situation.”<sup>18</sup> Expressing his sympathy with the Russian people who were apparently suffering under harsh economic conditions, Niebuhr reminded his readers of the context surrounding Russia’s current construction efforts. Russia’s real building and rehabilitation work after the Great War and the civil war, he explained, did not begin until the First Five-Year Plan was initiated. Niebuhr’s view on this, however, failed to do justice to Lenin’s effort to bring Russia back on its feet after the war. The NEP, historians generally agree, played a decisive role in stabilizing the country and resuscitating the Russian economy.<sup>19</sup>

As the initial superficial impressions gradually faded away, Niebuhr began to ponder upon the enthusiastic atmosphere that was engulfing this “land of extremes”. In fact, he addressed this outstanding phenomenon in his very first dispatch. The title he chose for the first dispatch, “Russia Makes Machine Its God,” is aptly indicative of his eagerness to

---

<sup>17</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia Makes Machine Its God”, P. 1080.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> For example, William J. Duiker argued that “As an economic strategy, the NEP succeeded brilliantly. During the early and mid-1920s, the Soviet economy recovered rapidly from the doldrums of war and civil war.” William Duiker, *Twentieth Century World History* (Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005), P. 82.

get a handle on the Russian experiment as a theologian. Niebuhr identified three causes for the tremendous enthusiasm with which the Five Year Plan was being embraced by the Russian people.

First of all, Niebuhr suggested, this enormous enthusiasm stemmed simply from a backward nation's craving for industrialization. This was why, he observed, an agrarian Russia which before the Five-Year Plan was merely three per cent mechanized suddenly decided to "make the machine its god". However, calling attention to the nature of Stalin's ambition, Niebuhr pointed out, the ongoing industrialization was in effect being used by Soviet leaders as a means of expanding and entrenching the principle of communism. For example, he noted, Russia's industrialization, specifically its heavy industry, which was supposed to lay the foundation for its developing economy, also served the purpose of preparing for war, which "in Russia is not regarded as a contingency but as an inevitability."<sup>20</sup> Therefore, "the primary purpose is political," Niebuhr remarked, the Five-Year Plan was essentially "a political program of achieving independence and security through the machine."<sup>21</sup> Clearly, Niebuhr understood very well that a political agenda lay at the heart of Stalin's grandiose plans.

Second, Niebuhr pointed out, the Plan was also an economic program aimed at raising the living standard of the whole population, albeit the Russian people had to endure privations and made sacrifices for this. It was obvious that enthusiastic as the Russian people initially were, without any tangible improvement of their material life in sight, the

---

<sup>20</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Russia's Tractor Revolution", *The Christian Century*, Vol. 47, No.37 (Sept 17, 1930), P. 1112.

<sup>21</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Russia Makes Machine Its God", P. 1081.

momentum of this ambitious social enterprise was bound to peter out. Thus understandably, expectations of a better life underpinned the Russian people's support of the Five Year Plan.

Lastly, Niebuhr suggested that the reason why the Russian people embraced the Plan so enthusiastically ran much deeper. "My guess is that a nation cast loose from its old moorings and free of all the cultural religious and moral traditions which once disciplined its life has, after several years of chaos and a few more years of indecisions, suddenly found the channel into which it is willing to pour its vitality."<sup>22</sup> Niebuhr's explanation matched his later interpretation of the origins of Russian communism. The way Niebuhr saw it, the Russian people's overwhelming enthusiasm for the construction of an equal and just society could best be interpreted as a psychological release from captivity. It seemed clear to Niebuhr that the Russian people's stupendous effort to transform their society had religious and moral dimensions. "A nation needs a religion," he declared, "and Russia's new religion is industrialization."<sup>23</sup> True to his unshaken belief that life could not be lived without religion, Niebuhr was quick to identify any "religious" elements in the ostensibly atheistic communist nation. As his engagement with Russia deepened, he would eventually classify communism itself, not the "machine", nor "industrialization", as the dominant religion of the Soviet society.

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Russia Makes Machine Its God", P. 1081.

In Niebuhr's view, the whole Soviet strategy comprised of industrialization and collectivization.<sup>24</sup> While he showed perceptible admiration for its large-scale industrialization, when it came to collectivization in agriculture, Niebuhr reserved his judgment and his remarks were equivocal. He noted that collectivization was indeed proceeding very rapidly across Russia. But he did not pass any quick judgment on whether collectivization itself was in the interest of the peasants or the Russian society as a whole. A visit to a collective farm in the country during harvest time did not impress him very much. Doubts about the benefits of collectivization were clearly on his mind during this trip, especially when the one meager common meal of the day, which consisted of black bread, cabbage soup, oatmeal and tea, was served at the noon hour.<sup>25</sup> Niebuhr came away feeling uncertain about whether those collectivized peasants were better off than their non-collectivized brethren. Although he was mindful of some of the problems caused by forced collectivization, Niebuhr appeared to be quite willing to tolerate the mistakes that Soviet leaders made in driving the farmers into collectivized farms, as the full scale of the horrendous disaster that sweeping collectivization brought to the Russian farmers was still unknown by the outside world.

The problem of efficiency in both industrialization and collectivization evidently caught Niebuhr's attention too. After visiting a number of factories and collective farms, Niebuhr felt that "a superficial view of the Russian scene seems in fact to yield the one outstanding impression of inefficiency."<sup>26</sup> The endless queues of Russian citizens waiting before virtually every store suggested to him that production and distribution

---

<sup>24</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Russia's Tractor Revolution", P. 1111.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Russian Efficiency", 1178.

were deplorably inadequate. He also noted abundant stories about careless cost calculation in metal industry, mining industry, construction field and irrigation projects.<sup>27</sup> Yet, here as in other cases, Niebuhr was of two minds. On the one hand, he thought all these problems were rooted in the whole Russian system and did not hesitate to attribute the cause of inefficiency to constitutional limitations in the scheme of communism. On the other hand, he conceded that those impressions were only superficial and therefore any quick conclusion might be erroneous. He was also willing to defend these impressions even if they corresponded to reality: “A nation which in a few brief years is trying to lift itself from the squalor of poverty to the heights of efficient industrialism is bound to make many mistakes.”<sup>28</sup> In addressing the problem of inefficiency, Niebuhr expressed his concerns and rightly identified the defects of communism and the autocratic tendencies of Russian system as contributing factors. But overall, he tended to explain this problem away and think of it as an issue that is more associated with the process of industrialization itself. “It would be idle to attribute all of this inefficiency to the type of organization which communism has developed. The factor of industrial immaturity may be more basic than the communistic scheme.”<sup>29</sup>

Up to this point, as can be seen, despite all sorts of problems he saw in the Five Year Plan, Niebuhr seemed to be quite willing to give Russian leaders, in particular, Stalin the benefit of doubt. Differing from those who portrayed Stalin as a ruthless dictator, he saw this “realistic” Soviet leader as “not so much a dictator as a political boss who uses all the

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

chicane which is common to political bosses to maintain his authority.”<sup>30</sup> Noting Stalin’s move to halt forced collectivization in the face of troubles caused by political intimidation and unfair taxation, Niebuhr gave Stalin credit for acting in the Russian peasants’ interests: “One is forced to marvel continually at the curious combination of political realism and unscientific dogmatism which characterizes the Russian political leaders.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Niebuhr sounded genuinely attracted to Stalin’s “political realism” before the sinister underbelly of communism was fully exposed. “He maintains himself by tacking carefully between right and left wing policy,” Niebuhr wrote of this Soviet leader, “with his ear close to the ground to hear just how much opposition his policies are arousing.”<sup>32</sup> Overall, insofar as perceiving Russia’s industrialization and collectivization as a success, besides showing sympathy for Russian people’s great sacrifice, Niebuhr believed that another key to this success lay in Stalin’s “realism”: “it is this combination of the patience of the people and the cool realism of the government which makes the bold experiment of the five year plan possible.”<sup>33</sup>

Being a theologian, examining the state of Russian Orthodox church and the fate of religion in the communist nation as a whole was understandably another indispensable part of Niebuhr’s agenda. How did the churches cope with forced closure by the authority? Would they survive the widespread persecution? With these weighty questions in mind, Niebuhr visited half a dozen churches in Moscow during a weekend.

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia’s Tractor Revolution”, P.1112.

<sup>32</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Glimpses from Soviet Russia”, P. 5.

<sup>33</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia’s Tractor Revolution”, P. 1112.

Overall, his sympathy stayed with those pathetic souls who were bucking the trend to keep religion alive in a hostile environment. He felt somehow relieved when he found out at least sixty percent of the churches in Moscow still open. Unimpressed, or rather, put off by the “uninspiring” Orthodox churches and bored with the “anachronistic” religious rites, Niebuhr nevertheless saw some justifications for the closure of churches in Russia. In one service, the religious forms seemed to him so “remote and unreal”, so much so that his mind

wanders to the eager young men and women who speak and work so earnestly for the building of a new Russia in which social justice shall prevail and who, if they lack the tenderness of the gospel which this church ought to be preaching, are certainly not without the gospel’s passion for social justice. One can almost share their bitterness toward the priests.<sup>34</sup>

Sympathetic as he was towards these oppressed priests, Niebuhr did harbor a certain measure of bitterness toward them as this indicated. One can also catch a glimpse of these mixed feelings from his following remarks:

Yet the logic of revolutions, while brutal, is not without a kind of rough justice and we would be sentimentalists to forget the intimate and organic relation between the church of these priests and the oppression of tsarist Russia. If innocent priests now suffer under the wrath of a revolutionary age, that may be one way of purging the guilt of the past.<sup>35</sup>

However, it is worth stressing that, Niebuhr’s bitter feelings toward the priests should be interpreted in light of his long-standing dislike for certain religions on the grounds of their rigid religious hierarchy and the reactionary role that they played in history, such as the Russian Orthodox Church or Catholicism. But brutality against religion was not something that he would condone:

---

<sup>34</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Church in Russia”, *The Christian Century*, Vol. 47, No. 38 (Sept 24, 1930), P. 1145.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

The new Russia is robust and vitally alive but, as in other instances of history, its vitality is shot through with brutality, and the vengeance it takes upon every representative and symbol of the old order must chill the ardor with which one would like to praise its achievements. There is justice in revolutions when seen from a distant and historic perspective, but seen in the immediate instance, the brutality of revolutions freezes the soul.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, well informed as he was by Eddy and others about the problem of religious persecution in Russia, Niebuhr still shuddered when he came across a poster in an educational exhibit which read: "Let us fight our enemies the kulaks, priests, prostitutes and thieves."<sup>37</sup> Haunted by stories about religious persecution and slogans like this, Niebuhr sounded clearly pessimistic about the fate of religion in such a hostile environment. He observed that even a more adequate church could not save a country which was bent on industrialization and "makes machine its god." The reason was that, on top of its overtly anti-religious spirit, Russia had put all of its spiritual resources into industrialization and became so absorbed in the grand Plan that "it cannot possibly be alive to those aspects of life which transcend every historic situation."<sup>38</sup>

The harsh treatment that traditional religion was receiving from the atheistic government, coupled with Russian public's enthusiasm for industrialization drove Niebuhr to reflect further on the role of religion in life. Bemoaning the sharp decline of religious piety and the rise of "irreligion" as a result, he observed that "Religion is a product of those insights which come to man when he stands above the hysteria of an age and the achievements of generation and feels the total problem of being man." Yet currently, the

---

<sup>36</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Church in Russia", P. 1146.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, P. 1145.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

whole Russian nation was obviously carried away by the hysteria of the industrial age. This hysteria, or fanaticism, submerged the “total problem of being man.” But the Russian people should know that, Niebuhr cautioned, once man transcended the flux of history, “he confronts the more ultimate problems of the meaning of life itself and its relation to the mysteries of the universe.”<sup>39</sup>

Meaning and mystery are two key concepts in Niebuhr’s understanding of religion. I will elaborate on this in due course. For the moment, suffice to note that merely one week into his trip, Niebuhr already identified “efficiency”, or the “machine”, or “industrialization” as the new God of the atheistic nation. In his view, Russia’s “worship” of efficiency, or the machine or industrialization underscored one fundamental fact of life, namely, every person, or every nation for that matter, needed a religion, which Niebuhr eventually defined as the bearer of meaning in life. Apprehensive about the prevailing anti-religious mood in Russia, Niebuhr predicted that Russia might be a terrible place to live in twenty years when “what is fine in its revolutionary ardor will have cooled.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, it was Niebuhr’s opinion that for now, the Russian people were consumed by the ardor that Stalin’s Five Year Plan whipped up. Earthly striving, instead of traditional religion, temporarily provided the Russian people with a sense of meaningfulness in life. But once this ardor subsided, disillusion would inevitably set in. After this trip, Niebuhr continued to reflect upon Russia’s irreligion and the role of communism along these lines, until he arrived at the conclusion that, anti-religion as it

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Church in Russia”, P. 1145.

was, communism itself, not the machine, nor industrialization, was the real national religion for Russia.

Unlike his friend Eddy, Niebuhr did not get the chance to travel extensively in Russia. But echoing Eddy's phrase "land of contradictions", he recapitulated his impressions about the Russia he saw in a similar manner in his last dispatch "The Land of Extremes". Coming to Russia at a time when the inequalities and poverties that industrialism was spawning grew more glaring daily in the depression-hit Western world, Niebuhr confessed, "only a callous conscience can view this Russian experiment without sympathy."<sup>41</sup> This observation epitomized Niebuhr's general attitude toward the Great Experiment on this trip. Clearly, like other visitors, he was deeply impressed by the Russian people's boundless enthusiasm in devoting themselves to building a brand new society. He also showed great sympathy for the sacrifice that Russian people were making to fulfill their ideal: "I doubt whether any generation in the history of the world has ever sacrificed itself (or is being sacrificed) so completely for the welfare of future generations as these Russians."<sup>42</sup> Russia's passion for equality also reinforced Niebuhr's belief that "Nothing is more basic to an ethical society than equality of opportunity," a belief that would eventually form the basis of Christian realism.<sup>43</sup> If the Western world was using force covertly to maintain social inequality, Niebuhr figured, then Russia was overtly using force for the right ends, that is, to establish equality.

---

<sup>41</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Land of Extremes", *The Christian Century*, Vol. 47, No. 42 (Oct. 15, 1930), P. 1242.

<sup>42</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Glimpses from Soviet Russia". P. 5.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

However, unlike some other famous travellers to Russia during this period, Niebuhr also expressed considerable skepticism about the Russian experiment as well. For example, after witnessing the Great Experiment firsthand, the well-known British dramatist and literary critic Bernard Shaw drew the conclusion that “The success of the Five Year Plan is the only hope of the world.”<sup>44</sup> Niebuhr let his reservations about the Plan, especially about the rapid industrialization be known: “If I have any conviction at all it is that the Russian conviction that they have the one unfailing method of socializing industry is almost certainly false.”<sup>45</sup> Regarding collectivization, after a conducted tour, Niebuhr’s colleague Harry Ward concluded that the whole enterprise had been greatly precipitated by peasant’s own aspiration for socialism.<sup>46</sup> Yet Niebuhr’s own experience on the collective farm seemed to discredit this view. The advantages of collectivization did not impress Niebuhr in the first place. As to the wider influences of the Russian experiment, the *New Republic* editor Bruce Liven argued that the significance of the Soviet experiment had universal consequences: “if it works in Russia at all, if it succeeds even 60 or 70 per cent, ... then there is every reason to believe that anywhere else in the Occident it would be a grand and glorious, a shining success.”<sup>47</sup> Niebuhr strongly disagreed: “Russia is so totally different from anything we know in the western world that nothing could be quite so unscientific as to imagine that what succeeds in Russia will succeed among us.”<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, the brutality and tyranny which seemed necessary to establish equality in Russia also left Niebuhr with doubt and uneasiness. He was evidently disturbed by a newspaper report about the execution of nine men on the charge

---

<sup>44</sup> See David Cate, *The Fellow-Travelers: Intellectual Friends of Communism*, P. 70.

<sup>45</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Glimpses from Soviet Russia”. P. 5.

<sup>46</sup> David Cate, *The Fellow-Travelers: Intellectual Friends of Communism*, P. 77.

<sup>47</sup> Lewis, S. Feuer, “American Travelers to the Soviet Union: 1917-1932”, P. 146.

<sup>48</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Glimpses from Soviet Russia”. P. 5.

of “hording coin.”<sup>49</sup> Closure of churches and persecutions of priests added further worries too. Lastly, in Niebuhr’s view, even the prevalent enthusiasm which seemed to impress every visitor to Russia was not simply the product of communism upon close examination. “The tremendous energy which the new Russia is unfolding is, in one of its aspects at least,” Niebuhr observed, “simply the vigor of an emancipated people who are standing upright for the first time in the dignity of a new freedom.”<sup>50</sup>

The Great Experiment, in short, seemed both exciting and baffling to Niebuhr. Nevertheless, after two weeks in the “land of extremes”, Niebuhr believed that he had found clues to the Russian enigma after all. Reflecting on the driving forces of the Great Experiment at the end of his journey, he concluded:

The whole Russian experiment is prompted on the one hand by the growing economic contrasts and the resulting political doctrines of the western world. In that sense Russian communism is the fruit of Marxism. But on the other hand, Russian communism is the natural fruit of the Russian temper which seems permanently to have committed itself to the principle, “all or nothing.” It is a principle from which great creative movements have sprung (as medieval asceticism at its best) but the same principle is also the source of every kind of fanaticism. Perhaps there is something of both in Russia today.<sup>51</sup>

Typical of western visitors to Russia during this period, Niebuhr invoked the factor of “Russian temper” in his interpretation of the Russian experiment. For western observers, especially reporters in Moscow, the nature of Russian temper, or national character, which exhibited “instinctual behavior” and “a lethargy shaken only by violence”

---

<sup>49</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Land of Extremes”, P. 1243.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, P. 1241.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, P. 1243.

constituted a crucial part of their understandings of the Soviet Five-Year Plan.<sup>52</sup> However, while most of these observers employed the national character or languages like “Asiatic Russia” to explain Russian people’s ability to withstand suffering, Niebuhr read much more into it: he perceived the Russian temper as the source of fanaticism as well. Ultimately, this set Niebuhr apart from other travellers to the Soviet Union, for “almost without exception,” as Lewis Feuer observed, those ideological intellectuals (writers, social scientist, social workers, etc) “went astray in their predictions; they foresaw a democratic, humanistic development; they never foresaw Stalinism.”<sup>53</sup> Niebuhr clearly was one exception in this regard, albeit not the only one. Doubts about Russian fanaticism, about whether “the force and the tyranny which is necessary to establish and to maintain it” might get out of hand were heavy on his mind as he wrapped up his trip to the “land of extremes.”<sup>54</sup> The result was, just one year after the trip, Niebuhr came to realize that the “Russian temper”, which was prone to extremism, constituted the ultimate origin of the rise of communism in Russia.

As Lewis Feuer pointed out further, since most American intellectuals who visited Russia only saw the official surface and did not experience the underlying tensions, their observations tended to be skewed.<sup>55</sup> Understandably, visitors on conducted tours, like those Niebuhr attended, which were organized by the Soviet Union’s Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Nations, could easily be taken in by the regime’s elaborate propaganda. A good example of this was Dewey’s tour of Russia in 1928, which focused

---

<sup>52</sup> David C. Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore: American Intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development*, P. 3, P. 207.

<sup>53</sup> Lewis S. Feuer, “American Travelers to the Soviet Union 1917-1932”, P. 143.

<sup>54</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Land of Extremes”, P. 1242.

<sup>55</sup> Lewis S. Feuer, “American Travelers to the Soviet Union 1917-1932”, P. 143.

on the Soviet educational system. As Sidney Hook remarked, his teacher drew the conclusion that Soviet educational system was the most enlightened in the world and closest to his own ideal, because he was merely shown “specially selected classes and schools that were not representative at all.”<sup>56</sup> One reason why Sherwood Eddy’s observations about Russia were markedly balanced was that he was able to travel with great freedom all over Russia, often without any guide or spy.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Will Durant, another famed American traveller to the Soviet Union in the early 1930s who deliberately avoided the officially organized tours offered much more accurate views and greater insights on the Soviet Union under the First Five Year Plan.<sup>58</sup>

In light of this, it can be said that in general, Niebuhr was unable to probe into problems like systematic repressions against non-communist elements and the horrendous liquidation of the so-called kulaks during his trip. In some cases, Niebuhr even advocated that forces and tyranny were justifiable in establishing equality.<sup>59</sup> However, despite his enthusiasm, Niebuhr evinced considerable reservations about the Great Experiment as well. The fanatic streak of the Russian temper especially left him uneasy. In fact this problem later became a key issue that he would continue to wrestle with throughout the 1930s, namely, the problem of communism as a form of religion. Nevertheless, at this point, driven by an earnest search for a workable social ideal, Niebuhr found it hard not to be impressed by the Russian people’s enthusiasm for building a just and equal society. He also showed admiration for the practice of

---

<sup>56</sup> Sidney Hook, *Out of Step: An Unquiet Life in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), P. 124.

<sup>57</sup> Sherwood Eddy, *Eighty Adventurous Years*, P. 143.

<sup>58</sup> Durant later published his report to the *Saturday Evening Post* under the title *The Tragedy of Russia: Impressions from a Brief Visit*, See Peter G. Filene, ed., *American Views of Soviet Russia, 1917-1965*, P. 79.

<sup>59</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Land of Extremes”, P. 1242.

socialization of productive means, something that he would advocate throughout the 1930s as well.

### **Observing the Impact of the Soviet Union's Industrialization from afar**

Niebuhr's interest in Russia continued to grow after he witnessed the Great Experiment in the making. He reviewed around ten books on Russia within one year after he returned from his trip.<sup>60</sup> Aside from introducing works on Russia to American readers, Niebuhr also continued to observe the Russian experiment from afar. While his attention was focused solely on Russia's achievements and problems during that trip, once back in America, Niebuhr became more aware of the wider impact of a rising Russia with increasing production capacity. Indeed, the impact of Russia's rapid industrialization to the Western world was one issue that occupied Niebuhr's attention for some time after his return.

With industrialization advancing apace, the Soviet Union's economic competitiveness was obviously mounting, especially in terms of supplies of raw materials and other low-end products. The ramifications of this were not lost on keen observers of international relations at that time. To some, the situation looked dire and they feared that a possible conflict between Russia and the West was looming large. Writing in *Russia*, a book which Niebuhr himself reviewed appreciatively, Hans von Eckardt observed that, in the middle of a world crisis, "the violent and unexpected eruption of the U.S.S.R. into the

---

<sup>60</sup> Based on Niebuhr's book reviews published in *The World Tomorrow* during this period.

world-economy threatens to precipitate a catastrophe.”<sup>61</sup> In the same apprehensive mood, Niebuhr began to pay more attention to this problem. Reviewing Joseph Freeman’s book *The Soviet Worker*, a book which he thought “must be placed among the authoritative volumes on Russian politics and economics,” Niebuhr went to the trouble of collecting specific statistics from this book to make his point.<sup>62</sup> From 1925 to 1931, he noted with mixed feelings, Russian industry increased its total output in relation to world industry from 2.8% to 11.2 %, with key raw materials such as steel rising from 2.4% to 7.6% and oil from 6% to 14.7% respectively.<sup>63</sup> While this represented impressive achievements on the part of Soviet Russia, what did this mean to the economies of the Western countries that were already hobbled with an oversupply of raw material?

Niebuhr formally addressed this problem soon after he returned from the Soviet Union. In an article entitled “Economic Perils to World Peace”, he argued that tariff barriers, reparations, and the expanding Russian economy constituted the major economic perils to the peace of the world.<sup>64</sup> By casting the burgeoning Soviet economy as a menace to world peace, Niebuhr did not intend to whip up fears of Russia among the already economically beleaguered American people. On the contrary, Niebuhr’s real aim in this article was to call for more understanding on the part of the Western nations, so that possible political conflicts could be averted. A balanced view of the rising Russian economy, he argued, should take into account the fact that Russia would offer a vast

---

<sup>61</sup> Hans Von Eckardt, *Russia* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1932), P. 4.

<sup>62</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “More Pro and Con on Russia”, Review of *The Soviet Worker* by Joseph Freeman, *The World Tomorrow*, Vol.15, No. 16 (Nov. 12, 1932), P. 428.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Economic Perils to World Peace”, *The World Tomorrow*, Vol. 14, No. 5 (May, 1931), P. 154.

market once it became a serious competitor. The solution therefore, he counselled, was for Western nations to readjust their economies in response to this competition so that they might make up for their losses by corresponding gains in the Soviet market. Unfortunately, Niebuhr's vision that an industrialized Russia would offer a big market for American goods did not come to pass as many, especially those who advocated establishing diplomatic relationships with Russia had earnestly hoped.

For the capitalist nations, the greatest difficulty caused by Russia's increasing competitiveness, Niebuhr further stressed, was that farmers in these countries would have to bear the brunt of the fierce competition coming from cheap Russian goods. The reason, he explained, was that farmers were left out of the circle of national prosperity in the political economy of almost all Western nations. But this problem resulted largely from Western nations' failure to deal with their domestic economic woes. Niebuhr seemed to suggest that capitalist nations were also to blame for the situation because of their failure to put their own house in order. Such sympathy with Russia was further revealed when he wrote that the real danger arising from the economic competition between Russia and the West was that "every tin-whistle politician who refuses to face the facts of the agrarian situation will try to escape his responsibilities by arousing the farmer's hatred and fear of Russia."<sup>65</sup> Such was Niebuhr's real concern about the impact of Russia's industrialization to the West. He was not primarily worried about how the already bad economic situations in capitalist nations could be aggravated by the flooding of cheap Russian goods. His gravest concern, instead, was that this current tense situation was likely to be exploited by Russia-bashing Western politicians for political

---

<sup>65</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Economic Perils to World Peace", P. 156.

purposes. For Niebuhr, it seemed clear that if the problem of an expanding Russia was not fully addressed, hostility toward Russia was bound to grow.

This was why a year later Niebuhr sounded even more serious about this problem and advocated “Making Peace With Russia” in the same magazine where he had first voiced his concerns. This time, in a clear-cut manner, he declared that among the problems threatening world peace, “the question of achieving and maintaining amicable relations between Russia and the other nations of the world is probably the most important.”<sup>66</sup>

What exactly made Russia such a possible threat to world peace? Niebuhr laid out three specific factors in this article. First, in terms of international politics, he explained, the Russian experiment, though impressive in many respects, was nevertheless “a bold departure from the generally accepted political and social organization of the rest of the world.”<sup>67</sup> This departure from convention itself bred mistrust among other nations. Therefore, a more powerful Russia would very likely “aggravate the prejudices which characterize international relationships even when common political convictions and similar economic customs give the nations a bond of unity.”<sup>68</sup> Indeed, Niebuhr had reasons to be worried in this regard. America refused to recognize the Soviet regime and did not establish diplomatic relations with the communist government until 1933, when President Roosevelt decided that a formalized relation between the two nations could help open the Russian market for American goods.

---

<sup>66</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Making Peace With Russia”, *The World Tomorrow*, Vol. 14, No. 11 (Nov. 1931), P. 354.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Making Peace With Russia”, P. 354.

Secondly, echoing the point he had previously made in “Economic Perils to World Peace”, Niebuhr warned that “Russia is disturbing international equilibrium” because its increased ability to export goods brought more pressure to a world already glutted with both raw materials and manufactured products. “The expanding Russian economy and the animosities created by dislocation of trade resulting from heavy Russian exports”, he wrote, was perhaps the “most dangerous in our relations with Russia.”<sup>69</sup> The problem was, did Russia have any hidden agenda in boosting its exports? Niebuhr offered two explanations as to what drove Russia’s aggressive export policy. One possible reason was that Russia’s policy was simply dictated by the necessities of its industrialization program. In other words, Russia needed capital to import machines that they were presently not capable of producing. Next, Russia’s export drive could also be prompted by a desire to embarrass the capitalistic nations swamped by the Depression and thereby make the rehabilitation of their shattered economy even more difficult. In either case, Niebuhr was worried that the growing Russian export scale was bound to “arouse the fears and excite the animosities of people who might not be disturbed by the boldness of the Soviet experiment, conducted on and confined to Russian soil.”<sup>70</sup>

Finally, Niebuhr thought, ideologically, by being fanatically devoted to its communist cause, Russia had made itself a very recalcitrant foe to the democratic West. Russian communists’ ingrained conviction that the Western world was intent on overthrowing their state, he wrote, created “a combination of aggressive zeal and defensive valor which

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, P. 355.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, P. 354.

might easily issue in a situation reminiscent of the Napoleonic venture and the ensuing wars at the beginning of the nineteenth century.”<sup>71</sup> Niebuhr’s concern about Russia’s aggressive zeal seemed genuinely serious at this point, for he repeated this concern later on when he addressed the problem of communism as religion. In fact, he expressed the exactly same concerns over the threat of this communist ideology: “Only a sentimentalist could be oblivious of the possibilities of Napoleonic ventures in the forces which are seething in Russia.”<sup>72</sup> The ideological menace of communism would eventually overshadow its political or economic threat in Niebuhr’s analysis of the challenge of communism, as he grew more convinced about the essence of communism as a religion which aimed not only to win the hearts and souls of the Russian people, but also to spread across the world.

Facing such a difficult situation, what should the Western nations have done? Driven by his typical pragmatism, perhaps more importantly, by his sympathy for the Soviet enterprise at this point, Niebuhr advocated “mutual understanding” and compromise between Russia and the West. The Western nations “have everything to gain and nothing to lose by drawing Russia more and more into the circle of mutual relations both politically and economically.”<sup>73</sup> As it would gradually become clearer, such a conciliatory stance marked Niebuhr’s general sentiments on Russo-American relations. This was apparent before America officially recognized the Soviet Union. It was equally obvious later when the two became arch rivals during the Cold War. But how could

---

<sup>71</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Making Peace With Russia”, P. 354.

<sup>72</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Religion of Communism”, *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 147, No. 4 (April, 1931), P. 465.

<sup>73</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Making Peace With Russia”, P. 355.

“mutual understanding” be achieved? Niebuhr was aware that under the circumstances, there was practically little that the West could do to persuade Russia to “understand” its own economic woes. The West obviously should have taken the initiative. To counter the possible threats from an industrializing Russia and escape mutual fear and hatred, Niebuhr suggested, Western nations can do so “only by honestly and dispassionately checking our own fears and prejudices and by seeking to understand those of the other side.”<sup>74</sup> Here again it is clear that Niebuhr’s sympathized with Russia.

Mindful that this approach may sound too naïve to the American public who were traditionally suspicious of Soviet Russia, Niebuhr explained that understanding industrializing Russia meant, above all, realizing that “however powerful may be the temptation to a military coup in decades to come, the present complete preoccupation with her industrialization program makes such a venture in any near future unthinkable.”<sup>75</sup> Uneasy about Russia’s aggressive zeal himself, Niebuhr obviously did not believe that Russia was hell bent upon confronting Western nations militarily as some feared, because he believed a war “would spell the defeat of everything which fires the ambitions of the Russian people.”<sup>76</sup> Russia was, after all, far from being militarily powerful enough to engage the Western nations at this point. Furthermore, Niebuhr pointed out, Russia’s obsession with industrialization also held its desire to spread revolution in other countries in check. In order to demonstrate the appeal of communism, Russia needed to show to the rest of the world how successful its Five Year Plan was. This was the reason, he explained, why Russia almost reversed its original idea that

---

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, P. 354.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, P. 355.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, P. 354.

communism in Russia could not succeed unless a world revolution came to its aid. Although Soviet leaders still clung to the idea of the inevitability of a world revolution, they were now realistic and willing to let history take its course, meanwhile cementing their foundations securely. In essence, Niebuhr observed, Russia's military spirit was spawned by a fear psychosis which could best be overcome by eliminating its ostensible or real justifications, namely, the forces that desired to "throttle the communist baby in its cradle".

In general, in the face of rising competition from the Soviet Union as a result of its frenzied industrialization, Niebuhr sounded very pragmatic and expressed considerable sympathy with the Soviet cause, however implicitly in most cases. Though eventually disillusioned with the Soviet cause, his pragmatic approach to the Soviet Union remained unchanged, even after the Nazi-Soviet Pact and in the Cold War Period. Counselling mutual understanding between Russia and the West in the early 1930s, Niebuhr was aware that there was little the West could do to influence Russia in this regard. His suggestions were, therefore, essentially aimed at capitalist nations. These suggestions boiled down to a single point, namely, the best way to tackle this problem was for the West to readjust their economic policies to cope with this new situation.

Niebuhr certainly did not expect that communism would sweep the world in the near future. But looking underneath Russia's expanding economy, he admitted that there was in communism an obvious challenge to the capitalistic system. Communism's challenge to capitalism appeared so serious that Niebuhr had to concede that "If communism and

capitalism were to compete with each other for the loyalty of peoples on the basis of their actual contribution to human welfare, we may be sure that communism would help to hasten the socialization of industrial life everywhere.”<sup>77</sup> Niebuhr’s sympathy with Russian communism was nowhere more salient. He even harbored hopes that “emancipated of undue fears and hatreds, Russia would incorporate certain values of western civilization into its own system.”<sup>78</sup> Of course, one needs to bear in mind that this was a time when the evils of communism had yet to manifest themselves. Nevertheless, at this point, it seemed clear to Niebuhr that the challenge of Russian communism extended far beyond its industrialization. This brings us to the next chapter, which studies another challenge arising from Russian communism, namely, the problem of communism as a pseudo-religion.

---

<sup>77</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Making Peace With Russia”, P. 355.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter Three

### The Religion of Communism: mid-1930s

Unlike those starry-eyed fellow-travellers, Niebuhr did not go to the Soviet Union because of his fondness for communism. What motivated Niebuhr to visit the Soviet Union at a time when the Western world remained deeply mired in the Depression was rather more of a search for a workable alternative to the seemingly doomed capitalism. Russian communism, impressive though in drumming up Russian people's enthusiastic support for the First Five Year Plan, nevertheless left Niebuhr with an unsettling impression that religious fanaticism was at work in the whole Russian enterprise. This was why, after that trip Niebuhr, besides addressing the question of the Soviet Union's expanding economy, continued to probe in the religious strain of Russian communism. The article he wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly* not long after he came back from the Soviet Union, "The Religion of Communism", indicated how he began to grapple with the challenge of communism on a much deeper level. "The problem of communist religion" - the title of one of his articles on this subject - was to be a recurring theme of his writings in the first half of the 1930s, including the two books that he produced during this period: *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) and *Reflections on the End of an Era* (1934).

Understanding how Niebuhr came to classify communism as a form of religion involves an investigation of how he defined religion in the first place. One of this thesis's arguments is that Niebuhr's engagement with communism played a direct role in

prompting him to reject liberal Christianity's interpretation about the role of religion in society. The "apocalyptic" communist religion, combining optimism and pessimism, also gradually drove him to see religion as a system of meaning that bears the ultimate human trust in life.

It needs to be emphasized from the outset, however, that though Niebuhr branded communism as a religion, he never regarded it as a valid religion in the strict sense. Rather, it was only in the sense that communism provides a frame of meaning, through which its followers seek to assert the meaningfulness of their lives, that Niebuhr classified this atheist belief as a religion – and a pseudo-religion to be exact. Any "religion" which denies the existence of God – the reality upon which all things depend, in terms of which they are explained and by which they are judged – for Niebuhr, could never be called a true religion. The reason why Niebuhr gave much attention to the communist religion was primarily because he saw that this pseudo-religion posed a great challenge to Christianity when the latter was proven impotent in the face of the brutal realities of the capitalist societies. And in most cases, Niebuhr used this communist religion as a target in his reconstruction of a viable Christian political ethic.

### **The Nature of Religion**

To understand why Niebuhr branded communism as religion, one first needs to have a clear idea about his understanding of religion. What is the nature of religious faith? What kind of role should religion play in society? By examining how Niebuhr viewed

these fundamental questions, we can also catch a glimpse of how Niebuhr's struggle with the challenge of Russian communism influenced his understanding of faith itself.

Commenting on the vitality of religion in the modern age in 1968, just three years before his death, Niebuhr wrote that religious faith was "an expression of trust in the meaning of human existence, despite all the cross purposes, incongruities, and ills in nature and history."<sup>1</sup> That Niebuhr repeated exactly the same point he had made earlier in articles like "Faith as the Sense of Meaning in Human Existence" (1966) and "A View from the Sideline of Life" (1967) as death approached highlights the pivotal role of one idea in his works, namely, the idea of faith as the bearer of the meaningfulness of life. In fact, the idea that "Faith as the sense of meaning in human existence" is the prism through which we should view all of Niebuhr's major works.

Understandably, however, Niebuhr's views on the nature of faith were not set in stone. As with his political views, Niebuhr's understanding about religion itself underwent a deepening process as well. The challenge that Russian communism posed in the early 1930s was in a sense a catalyst for this evolving process, which ended roughly at the end of this eventful decade. Thus when Niebuhr talked about faith as the sense of meaning in human existence in late 1960s, he was, to a large extent, simply reaffirming his convictions about the nature of religion that dated from the late 1930s. At this point, one question arises, that is, when and how did Niebuhr form the idea of faith as the bearer of a person's trust in the meaningfulness of existence?

---

<sup>1</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, Preface, Ronald H. Stone, ed., *Faith and Politics: A Commentary on Religious, Social and Political Thought in a Technological Age* (New York: George Braziller, 1968), Viii.

As his diary reveals, in 1924, while still an aspiring young pastor preaching in Detroit, Niebuhr was of the view that “Religion is a reaction to life’s mysteries and a reverence before the infinitudes of the universe.”<sup>2</sup> Religion, it is worth noting, referred to the young pastor’s own religious faith in this context. In other words, for young Niebuhr, Christianity represented first and foremost a feeling of awe and humility before infinity. Later on, when he posed the big question “does civilization need religion?” in his first book, which in many ways was an extension of the main argument of his Bachelor of Divinity thesis of 1913, it was clear that the term “religion” also remained largely associated with Western Christianity.<sup>3</sup> As to the essence of religion, Niebuhr offered yet another interpretation. Still under the influence of the Social Gospel Movement, he claimed that “religion is the champion of personality in a seemingly impersonal world.”<sup>4</sup> This explanation about the role of religion in life was very typical of the optimistic Christian liberalism, which had an unqualified belief in the plasticity of human nature and the value of personality. Christianity, as these optimistic liberals advocated, was essentially a teaching of the set of Christian ethics that Jesus personified. Young Niebuhr clearly subscribed to this view, in no small measure due to his liberal education at Yale Divinity School.

Indeed, though no specific definition of religion can be found in this book, young Niebuhr’s understanding of the role of religion was perfectly in keeping with the liberal

---

<sup>2</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of A Tamed Cynic*, P. 49.

<sup>3</sup> Namely, the role of religion was to preserve and promote personality in an impersonal universe, Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Validity of Religious Experience and Certainty of Religious Knowledge”, BD thesis, Reinhold Niebuhr Papers, container 17.

<sup>4</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Does Civilization Need Religion: A Study of the Social Resources and Limitations of Religion in Modern Life* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927), P. 4.

tradition. Religion, he wrote in the opening chapter, at its best was “both a sublimation and a qualification of the will to live.”<sup>5</sup> Put another way, as most Christian liberals sincerely believed, religion not only sustained life but also had the power of elevating people to higher ethical levels. Any positive social enterprise, young Niebuhr agreed with other liberal Christians, must ultimately be guided by the conscience of man. The contribution of religion – the ultimate motivator of conscience – to the task of a reconstruction of society was “its reverence for human personality and its aid in creating the type of personality which deserves reverence.”<sup>6</sup> In a word, religion, as it seemed to the young pastor, was primarily an elevating ethical force exhorting people to heed their conscience in their personal life, as well as in building a better society, wherein if the example of Jesus was faithfully followed, love, justice, good-will and brotherhood would eventually prevail.

The concept of “meaning”, a key concept in Niebuhr’s interpretation of religion, began to surface in his writings in the early 1930s. In “Religion and Poetry” (1930), which William C. Chrystal suggested revealed much about Niebuhr, the “religion” or “vital religion” that Niebuhr referred to was still mainly Christianity.<sup>7</sup> Traces of optimism and idealism about religion (Christianity) as the champion of personality were also manifest. For example, he wrote that religion could be defined as a “sense of the whole”. He also maintained that “religion, in a sense, gives us not a picture of the world as it is but the

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, P. 26.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, P. 62.

<sup>7</sup> William C. Chrystal, *Young Reinhold Niebuhr: His Early Writings, 1911-1931*(New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1977), P. 39.

world as it ought to be.”<sup>8</sup> But on the other hand, it was also clear that the concept of “meaning”, supplanting “personality”, began to assume a more prominent position in his approach to religion. In likening religion to poetry, Niebuhr saw religion as “a poetic apperception and appreciation of the total meaning of reality.”<sup>9</sup> Religion, in other words, he now argued, should be seen as a meaning-asserting force guiding people through the chaos and emptiness of life. “Religion insists that life has meaning when obviously much of life is chaotic”, he wrote, “But it achieves meaning through those who act upon the assumption that life can be lived by the guidance of a sublime purpose and that there are clues to this propose in the cosmos itself.”<sup>10</sup>

Niebuhr’s change of attitude toward the nature of religion could be partially explained by the shifting of political and economic situation in America itself. Across America, in the halcyon days before the Great Depression, the problem of the meaning of life did not seem to occupy much of the optimistic Christian liberals’ attentions. Religion was generally perceived as a “champion of personality” battling with the dehumanizing industrialization as Niebuhr explicated in his first book. But when the world was turned upside down in 1929, everything including the meaningfulness of existence was thrown into doubt. The problem of meaning therefore came to the forefront in religion’s battle against life-ravaging forces. A society now gripped by pessimism and desperation called for a much more life-asserting spiritual force to guide people through the crisis. The shift

---

<sup>8</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Religion and Poetry”, in William C. Chrystal, *Young Reinhold Niebuhr: His Early Writings, 1911-1931*, P. 222.

<sup>9</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Religion and Poetry”, P. 221.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. P. 223.

of emphasis from “personality” to “meaning” in Niebuhr’s approach to religion, therefore, could be seen as a perfect reflection of the spiritual needs of that time.

Niebuhr’s motivation to focus on the problem of meaning in his understanding of religion sprung from another source, that is, his struggle with the communist “religion”. The term “religion” itself took on a wider and deeper meaning in his writings as his engagement with the Soviet Union deepened in the 1930s. As mentioned earlier, in his very first dispatch sent back from his 1930 trip, struck by the sprightly enthusiasm of the Russian people, Niebuhr remarked that “A nation needs a religion and Russia’s new religion is industrialization”. “Religion”, loosely interpreted here, obviously refers to a kind of spiritual force or guide to a nation. In any event, starting from his direct encounter with the Russian experiment, Niebuhr did not have Christianity exclusively in his mind when he used the term “religion”. Driven by his old belief that Christianity provided the ultimate incentive to any great social enterprise in the West, Niebuhr now entertained the idea that the alleged irreligious communist nation must possess something equivalent to Christianity in Western society, something sublime, something that motivated people to make great sacrifices for their cause. At this point, he first identified the “machine”, and then “industrialization” as constituting Russian religion. But whatever kind of religion he called it, the notion that religion was the champion of personality could not sound more obsolete to Niebuhr once he appreciated the depth of Russian people’s enthusiasm in transforming their society. Religion, as the Russian experiment suggested to him, was

perhaps more of a “devotion to a cause which goes beyond the warrant of pure rationality.”<sup>11</sup>

But to Niebuhr, an unconditional devotion to a cause did not necessarily qualify as an adequate religion. With the havoc that the Depression wrought on the Western society in the back of his mind, Niebuhr believed that the Russian people were too preoccupied with the Five Year Plan to ruminate on the ultimate problems of life, which were thrown into sharp relief by the unprecedented economic crisis in the West. What the Russians were doing, it appeared to him, was very similar to what America experienced in its own industrialization – solving “immediate” problems of life, namely, improving people’s material life. But what America was going through, namely, wrestling with the problem of the meaning of life, probably also lay ahead for the Russian people. As he noted in “Church of Russia” (1930), “At some point, Russia will realize that when man has solved his immediate problem he confronts the more ultimate problems of the meaning of life itself and its relation to the mysteries of the universe.”<sup>12</sup> A true religion, he emphasized, “is a product of those insights which come to man when he stands above the hysteria of an age and the achievements of his generation and feels the total problem of being man.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, contrasting the economic crisis at home and Russia’s vibrant Five Year Plan in his mind, Niebuhr now became more convinced that an adequate religion must concern “the ultimate problems of the meaning of life”. Clearly, by now, the concept of “meaning” had taken on a very solid position in his interpretation of religion.

---

<sup>11</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Religion of Communism”, P. 462.

<sup>12</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Church in Russia”, P. 1145.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Could Russian people's worship of "machine" or "industrialization" fully explain their religious zeal in embracing the Five Year Plan? At the end of his trip to the Soviet Union, Niebuhr felt particularly doubtful about this. Within one year after this trip, as his understanding of communism deepened, he eventually drew the conclusion that communism, combining optimism and pessimism, was an apocalyptic religion that drove the whole Russian enterprise.

Niebuhr addressed this problem formally in his article "The Religion of Communism". In this article, he expanded his definition of religion from "a devotion to a cause which goes beyond the warrant of pure rationality" and argued that in maximum terms, religion "is the confidence that the success of the cause and of the values associated with it is guaranteed by the character of the universe itself."<sup>14</sup> Russian people's enthusiasm for building a just and equal society, Niebuhr suggested, ultimately stemmed from their strong belief that history was on their side. This confidence was nothing but an outward expression of their trust in the meaningfulness of life. "The Problem of Communist Religion" (1934), another article on this subject, was also based on this view. In this article, Niebuhr declared that religion could be defined as "the act of faith by which life is endowed with meaning or by which the meaning of life is apprehended."<sup>15</sup> This explanation of the nature of religious faith, as can be seen, is not a far cry from what he wrote in 1968 – faith is "an expression of trust in the meaning of human existence."

"Optimism, Pessimism and Religious Faith", the Ware Lecture that Niebuhr gave before the American Unitarian Association in 1934 offered his most comprehensive

---

<sup>14</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Religion of Communism", P. 462.

<sup>15</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Problem of the Communist Religion", *The World Tomorrow*, Vol. 17, No. 15 ( July 26, 1934), P. 378.

interpretation about the nature of religious faith so far. Indeed, this lecture was probably his most definitive take on this topic during the 1930s, since six years later it also appeared in his book *Christianity and Power Politics* (1940).

Niebuhr started examining “Optimism, Pessimism, and Religious Faith” by looking into the sources of “human vitality”. As he saw it, human vitality consisted of two primary sources, namely, “animal impulse and confidence in the meaningfulness of human existence.”<sup>16</sup> The more human consciousness ascended to full self-consciousness, he argued, the more it entailed “confidence in the meaningfulness of its world to maintain a healthy will-to-live.”<sup>17</sup> As to this confidence in the meaningfulness of life, it did not come from a comprehensive analysis of the whole human enterprise. In fact, “it is something which is assumed in every healthy life. It is primary religion.”<sup>18</sup> Put simply, it was Niebuhr’s conviction that life could not be lived without religion. The substance of this religion was an expression of a human trust in the meaningfulness of existence. The function of this religion, or, “primary religion”, as Niebuhr suggested in his first book, was “a sublimation and a qualification of the will to live”. In a word, a “vital religion”, as Niebuhr came to see, sought “a center of meaning in life which is able to include the totality of existence.”<sup>19</sup>

Most significantly, in this lecture, underscoring communism’s challenge to the West, Niebuhr classified communism as a “Marxian alternative” to the Jewish-Christian

---

<sup>16</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Optimism, Pessimism and Religious Faith”, in Robert McAfee Brown, ed., *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), P. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, P. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

religion. It is obvious that at this stage, he was deeply convinced that although communism was not on a par with classical religion such as Christianity, it nevertheless offered a center of meaning for the Russian people. By promising that an equal and just society was within reach, communism elicited the Russian people's trust in their collective cause, or, in Paul Tillich's words, "the courage to be as a part," thereby essentially assuming the role of a religion.<sup>20</sup> It was a religion that needed to be seriously reckoned with.

### **The Religion of Communism**

The religion of communism, as mentioned earlier, was one of the problems that Niebuhr first addressed in his article "The Religion of Communism". Reflecting on the prevalent faith in Russia that "collectivization plus industrialization will create a new paradise", a "naive faith" that numerous Russian propaganda films spread, he declared that although communism claimed to be a scientific and irreligious social philosophy, "in reality it is a new religion. Its virtues and its vices are the virtues and vices of religion."<sup>21</sup> In this context, religion, in its minimum terms, as mentioned earlier, means an unqualified devotion to a particular cause. Niebuhr believed that apparently communism fell within the minimum terms of the definition of religion. The philosophy of communism, he claimed, already had metaphysical dimensions for its most fanatic devotees. In reality, the ardor that communists exhibited in spreading communism, in his view, smacked of religious fervor. Furthermore, he suggested, the religious character of communism was

---

<sup>20</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), P. 86 – 103.

<sup>21</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Religion of Communism", P. 462.

also revealed by its hatred of the traditional religion of the Russian peasant. “It is because it is a religion, which rests ultimately not in reason but upon an act of faith, that it expresses itself so violently against a competing religion.”<sup>22</sup>

So why is communism a religion? It seems that Niebuhr offered two different yet interconnected reasons. First, he categorized communism as religion on the grounds of the immense power that it exerted on its followers, be it their fanatic devotion to the communist cause or their visceral hatred of traditional religion. Driven by his conviction that some kind of religion was the basis of every potent social program, he drew the analogy that the robust energy Russian people exuded in carrying out the Five Year Plan in fact sprung from a deeply held faith. “Communism is a religion of mixed ethical values, but its energy proves that it is a religion.”<sup>23</sup> Secondly, he defined communism as religion by explaining why a scientific world view, as communism claimed to be, could not be made as an adequate basis of social actions. The facts of history defied scientific analysis and precise conclusions. As such, “The philosophies which attempt to harmonize the recalcitrant facts, whatever their scientific pretensions, always have an element of religion in them.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, each philosophy of life, including communism, tended to view the facts of history from a particular perspective. This perspective in turn, was dictated by “the way in which a generation or an individual feels about the meaning of life and by what he regards as ultimate and important.”<sup>25</sup> Thus despite its denial of having any metaphysical claims, judging by these two criteria,

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, P. 468.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, P. 463.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

communism's confidence in the ultimate triumph of the proletarian cause essentially represented a "mystic and ultra-rational faith that something in the character of reality itself is the guarantee of this triumph."<sup>26</sup>

Branding communism as religion did not necessarily mean that Niebuhr had no appreciation of it. In fact, as is clear in this article, communism's catastrophic and apocalyptic view of history very much appealed to him. Compared to faith in progress which was "in its essence a religious dogma", the faith of communism, it appeared to Niebuhr, was more realistic in the sense that it did not view progress as automatic, though it did believe progress to be inevitable. The apocalyptic idea in communism that history was drifting towards disaster and a new world would emerge out of it clearly struck a chord with Niebuhr. For all its shortcomings, Niebuhr believed, this apocalyptic view was "a powerful incentive to social action" which the western world sorely needed.<sup>27</sup> As for the potency of this apocalyptic message, it stemmed precisely from communism's combination of optimistic and pessimistic determinism, because "its pessimism lifts the individual above the processes of history so that he may judge contemporary facts in the light of his ideal while its optimism saves him from enervating despair, by promising that somehow victory will be snatched out of defeat."<sup>28</sup>

Overall, at this point, Niebuhr firmly believed that "in politics energy is more important, at least from the standpoint of perpetuating a regime, than scientific thought."<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, P. 468.

Therefore, at a time when the Western world was still groping about for ways to wriggle out of the Depression, the communist religion, which combined pessimism and optimism, seemed to him to be offering a powerful challenge, if not a workable alternative, to the overly optimistic, yet socially impotent Christian liberalism. Although he criticized some aspects of communism, such as its disregard for individual personality, at this stage, Niebuhr appeared to be more impressed with communism as an incentive to robust social enterprise, because of its unique combination of pessimism and optimism.

Niebuhr's appreciation of communism grew steadily as the Depression worsened at home. Observing the misery of the poor and the selfishness of the rich, he realized how appealing the apocalyptic communist religion could appear to the disinherited, since in his view, religion was "always a citadel of hope, which is built on the edge of despair."<sup>30</sup> By the time he brought out *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), "a tract for times out of joint",<sup>31</sup> Niebuhr had become, according to one critic, "a realistic 'red'", for in this provoking tract he spoke decidedly in the name of the disinherited.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, in this book, sympathizing with the disinherited, a gloomy Niebuhr even made the rather startling prediction that "Communism is bound to become a force in modern society, as certainly as modern society disinherits a portion of its community completely. Perhaps that fact ought to be welcomed."<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society, A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), P. 62.

<sup>31</sup> T. V. Smith, Review of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Apr. 1933) P. 370.

<sup>32</sup> L.M. Paper, Review of *Moral and Immoral Society*, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Apr, 1933), P. 296.

<sup>33</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, P. 223.

The thesis of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, as Niebuhr made clear from the outset, was that “a sharp distinction must be drawn between the moral and social behavior of individuals and of social groups, national, racial, and economic; and that this distinction justifies and necessitates political policies which a purely individualistic ethic must always find embarrassing.”<sup>34</sup> Levelling his criticism against moralists, sociologists and educators who completely disregarded “the political necessities in the struggle for justice in human society”, he argued that “when collective power, whether in the form of imperialism or class domination, exploits weakness, it can never be dislodged unless power is raised against it.”<sup>35</sup> The overriding theme of achieving justice through a power struggle is unmistakable.

Why did Niebuhr appear to be so supportive of the use of power in social struggle? The answer lies in how he had become more attached to communism’s espousal of justice and equality. Commenting on the Marxist dogma of class struggle, Niebuhr confessed that “it is a fact that Marxian socialism is a true enough interpretation of what the industrial worker feels about society and history, to have become the accepted social and political philosophy of all self-conscious and politically intelligent industrial workers.”<sup>36</sup> This “Marxian socialism” had certainly become the social and political philosophy for Niebuhr himself by now. Quoting approvingly from Marx’s *A Critique of Political Economy* and Engels’ *Economic Interpretation of History* respectively, he admitted that “stated in this reasonable form, few economists or historians would dissent from such an

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, xi.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, xii.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, P. 144.

interpretation of history.”<sup>37</sup> The relation of social classes in a society was ultimately a power struggle. As cultural, moral and religious forces all belong to ideological superstructure which rationalizes class interests, the power which inhered in the ownership of the means of production can only be countered by the use of force against it. Such was Niebuhr’s newly acquired belief.

Reasonable as this Marxist interpretation of history sounded to him, Niebuhr found the religious overtone of communism even more alluring, especially when viewed from the perspective of the exploited and disinherited. Praising Marx’s doctrine on the mission of the proletariat, he remarked that “it is more than a doctrine. It is a dramatic, and to some degree, a religious interpretation of proletarian destiny. In such insights as this, rather than in his economics, one must discover the real significance of Marx.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed, he now saw more similarities between communism and Christianity, not least as regards the “millennial hope”. In his view, there was a millennial hope in every “vital religion”. Wherever such a religion concerned itself with the problems of society, it always produced some kind of millennial hope. In the case of communism, by projecting an ideal society where people happily live by the principle of “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”, it furnished a much needed hope to victims of industrialization and capitalism. As such, he suggested, “the modern communist’s dream of a completely equalitarian society was a secularized, but still essentially religious, version of the classical religious dream.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, he continued his analogy, if Christianity was the revolt of slaves (Nietzsche), then communism was just another

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, P. 145.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, P. 154.

<sup>39</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, P. 61.

kind of slave revolt, a revolt of the weak, not the meek. If the Christian poor hoped that spiritual forces will endow meekness with strength, the proletariats, in the same vein, believed that history was on their side and thus were willing to devote wholeheartedly to their cause.

More importantly, Niebuhr now implied that the millennial hope in communism was in a sense superior to the Christian one. First, communism's millennial hope was balanced by its emphasis upon catastrophe: "It is pessimistic about the present trends in society and sees them driving toward disaster."<sup>40</sup> This sense of catastrophe, of course, sat very well with Niebuhr's own mood. The thought that the Western society was drifting toward disaster underlay his soon-to-be published book *Reflections on the End of an Era*. In other words, communism's "apocalyptic vision", it now seemed to him, to a large extent corresponded to the dire political and economic situation of capitalist nations. By contrast, liberal Christianity, with all its sanguine hopes for a better society, could not sound more out of touch with reality. Communism's dream, Niebuhr wrote, represented an attempt to "snatch victory out of defeat in the style of great drama and classical religion."<sup>41</sup> Marx's formulation that the proletariat will find in the very disaster of his social defeat the harbinger of his final victory, in fact, was a "transvaluation of values in the grand style."<sup>42</sup> Secondly, the reason why the communist millennial dream had an edge over the Christian millennial hope was that, "compared to the religio-ethical dreams of the Christians, the religio-political dreams of the Marxians have an immediate

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, P. 62.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, P. 154.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

significance.”<sup>43</sup> Political ideals were more capable of being realized in history than moral ideals, he explained. In light of this, communism’s commitment to justice and equality certainly sounded to him to be more realistic than Christianity’s espousal of love.

The communist religion, in a word, was an apocalyptic religion marked by “transvaluation of values” in a grand style. It expected the realization of the absolute like all classical religions, yet carried “immediate significance” because its political ideals were more attainable. Such was the appeal of communism in Niebuhr’s eyes in the early 1930s. Would this communist religion prevail? How could the immoral society which left millions of souls impoverished and trampled on by the rich be transformed? Liberal Christianity, believing in the essential goodness of human nature and the realization of the perfect ethical goal in social arena, had proved pathetically impotent in the face of mounting social crisis. Was Marxism an adequate solution to the plethora of ills of western society? Was the era of capitalism and democracy coming to an end? What would become of liberal Christianity? *Reflections on the End of an Era* (1934), allegedly Niebuhr’s most Marxism-oriented book, was an attempt to address those problems as the author became increasingly gloomy over the prospect of the immoral society.

Perhaps Niebuhr’s most pessimistic work, *Reflections on the End of an Era*, which contained “a philosophy of defeat” as some liberals accused, marked a watershed in Niebuhr’s perceptions of communism as religion, and concomitantly, in his views about the role of liberal Christianity in building a new society.<sup>44</sup> Hitherto, although from time

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. P. 156.

<sup>44</sup> Carl Everett Purinton, Review of *Reflections on the End of an Era*, *Journal of the National Association of*

to time he lashed out at communism, particularly with regard to its utopianism and fanaticism, in general, Niebuhr saw communism mainly as an attractive apocalyptic religion. By endowing meaning and hope to the millions of lives of the disinherited, communism thus posed a great challenge to Christianity as a moral source of social enterprise. As to the role of liberal Christianity, inadequate and out of touch with reality as it was, Niebuhr had yet to offer a constructive approach to rescue it and bring it to bear upon the pressing problems of the day. However, the rise of Nazism in Germany, combined with revelations of brutalities of Russian communism gradually drove Niebuhr to see communism in a rather different light. From mid-1930s, as was evident in *Reflections on the End of an Era*, the peril of the vengeance-prone communism began to overshadow the appeal of the “Marxian Alternative” in Niebuhr’s major works. In the meantime, Niebuhr also started to map out a new Christian political ethic.

Niebuhr concluded in this book that a liberal culture of modernity was unable to provide guidance to a confused generation which faces the disintegration of a social system.<sup>45</sup> As a result, with “an apocalyptic habit of mind”,<sup>46</sup> Niebuhr argued that “adequate spiritual guidance can come only through a more radical political orientation and more conservative religious convictions that are comprehended in the culture of our era.”<sup>47</sup> Overall, Niebuhr’s thesis in this book was consistent with his previous book: capitalist groups, by their very immoral nature, would never willingly relinquish their power; consequently, the proletariat must resort to power struggle to achieve justice. One

---

*Biblical Instructors*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1934) , P. 47.

<sup>45</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1934), ix.

<sup>46</sup> A. Z, Review of *Reflections on the End of an Era*, *International Affairs*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Mar-Apr. 1935), P. 249.

<sup>47</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era*, ix.

remarkable difference between these two Marxist works, as mentioned earlier, was that the latter was marked by an acute sense of apocalypse that was implied in the title. Yet paradoxically, this “prophet of doom” also held out hopes about a resurgence of a vital Christianity as the end of an era approached.<sup>48</sup>

With Nazism taking hold in Western Europe and the Depression deepening across the capitalist world, Niebuhr sensed that democracy was dying and most of the modern capitalistic nations seemed destined to embark on fascist adventures. In his view, the rise of fascism partly stemmed from the defects of communism. “The egoism and vindictiveness of communism,” he argued, “threatens the western world with decades of internecine strife because it narrows the base of the worker’s political power and limits him as the agent of a new unity in civilization.”<sup>49</sup> The result, he added, was other classes which were alienated by the proletariat would be driven into the arms of his enemies and that was precisely what was happening at that time in Europe.<sup>50</sup> Niebuhr certainly had criticized the fanaticism and brutalities of Russian communism before. But with the specter of fascism looming large in Europe, the collectivization of agriculture in the Soviet Union continuing apace, he was now under the impression that the excessiveness of brutality in Russian communism might have considerable bearing on what was happening on the European continent. As a result, he began to look more closely at the root of the excessive cruelty and other perils of communism.

---

<sup>48</sup> Carl Purinton, Review of *Reflections on the End of an Era*, P. 47.

<sup>49</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era*, P. 175.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, P. 175.

Using the liquidation of kulaks in Russia as an example, Niebuhr argued that “the peril of barbarism” was derived from the spirit of vengeance and justice alike which were both inherent in communism. The proletariat inclined to identify the specific evils with the principle of evil per se and to glorify himself as the disinterested instrument of justice, revealing the egoistic element in his spirit of justice. As such, Niebuhr claimed, “the fact that the egoistic and vindictive element in the spirit of justice is not recognized as the very basis of its excessive cruelty.”<sup>51</sup> The proletariat could show extreme cruelty in exterminating his foes because he was under the illusion that justice was on his side and that he would eliminate injustice itself. This explained why the Russian communist could be ruthless in treating his “class enemies” like kulak. In fact, Niebuhr pointed out, the extension of the term “kulak” itself, which originally meant rich peasant usurers, but which now included every peasant who resisted collectivization, served as a good example of how cruel the spirit of vengeance could be when the cruelties were carried out in the name of justice. In light of this, he concluded, “the vigor with which the Russian communist subordinates the peasant to the interests of a collectivized industrial society is an interesting example of the unconscious imperialism of a group expressing itself in devotion to what it regard a universal principle.”<sup>52</sup>

Niebuhr’s criticism of communism’s cruelty and its ramifications was also succinctly expressed in “The Problem of Communist Religion” in the same year that *Reflections on the End of an Era* was published. What is communist religion? Echoing Harold Laski’s letter from Russia regarding the religious character of communism, in this article,

---

<sup>51</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era*, P. 168.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, P. 172.

Niebuhr provided a clear-cut definition to the communist religion: “communism is a religion in which the victims of capitalistic injustice rescue meaning from chaos by discovering that the logic of history (God) affirms the justice of their cause and promises them an ultimate victory.”<sup>53</sup> In other words, communism was an act of faith which imparted meaning - the achievement of justice - to its believers by promising that history was on their side. As to the term “religion” itself, in this context, Niebuhr defined it as an act of faith by which life acquired its meaning, for in his view, every religion was based on some assumptions about the meaningfulness of life.

To declare communism as a religion did not, Niebuhr stressed, imply anything in regard to its virtue as either a religion or a political philosophy. Compared with his stance on the religion of communism in the early 1930s, in this article, Niebuhr expressed more reservations about the role of communism as a source of social incentive. The religious character of communism, he now emphasized, was the source of both its political strength and its demonic peril. More than that, in fact, “communism is a bad religion precisely because it is a political religion.”<sup>54</sup> In the history of religion, he added, communism represented a return to primitive tribalism, as was, for that matter, Germany’s Nazism. Why is that? Niebuhr explained, by portraying one particular social group (proletariat) as the disinterested agent of justice, and by treating opposing social groups not merely as enemies but as the embodiment of evil, communism “introduces a demonic cruelty into social life which only religion can supply”.<sup>55</sup> This demonic cruelty

---

<sup>53</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Problem of Communist Religion”, *The World Tomorrow*, Vol. 17, No. 10 (July 26, 1934), P. 378.

<sup>54</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Problem of Communist Religion”, P. 378.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, P. 379.

ran the danger of “driving all neutral and semi-neutral groups in a complex society into the camp of the reactionary foe.”<sup>56</sup> Apparently, Nazism, a more sinister form of primitive tribalism taking hold in Europe was what Niebuhr had in mind when he talked about the reactionary foe.

Niebuhr’s perceptions about the religion of communism clearly shifted, as did his views on religion itself in this process. Believing that a political movement must be religious in order to succeed, Niebuhr already sensed the religious character of communism during his trip to the Soviet Union. At that point, he was more struck by the extent to which the communist religion could galvanize the Russian people in their pursuit of a better society. As the 1930s wore on, frustrated by the impotency of liberal Christianity in the face of deepening social crisis, Niebuhr increasingly found the catastrophic vision of communism which combined both optimism and pessimism a more realistic description of contemporary problems. Although the rise of Fascism and the gradual revelations about the brutalities of communism forced him to pay more attention to the negative sides of the communist religion, by mid-1930s, Niebuhr still believed that “an adequate radical political policy must be Marxian in the essentials of political strategy.”<sup>57</sup> Capitalism, communism’s arch rival, as he saw it, was in the last stage of its decay and would be buried by its inherent contradictions.

However, would this communist religion prevail outside Russia? Was America inching toward a Soviet America, as William Z. Foster, the leader of the Communist Party in

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era*, P. 177.

America, claimed in his book *Toward Soviet America*?<sup>58</sup> To answer these sorts of questions, Niebuhr felt it a necessity to understand how communism came to birth in Russia.

### **The Origin of Russian Communism**

The origin of Russian communism was a subject that Niebuhr had already spoken about during his trip to the Soviet Union in 1930. Impressed by the enthusiasm that communism released among the Russian people, yet unsettled by the brutalities it committed, at the end of his trip, he concluded that Russian communism stemmed from two sources: one being the fruit of Marxism, the other being the natural fruit of the Russian temper, which was prone to extremism. In Niebuhr's eyes, that capitalism was slowly dying, as signalled by the deepening Depression, largely validated Marxism's critique of capitalism. In this sense, the birth of Russian communism, though not out of the ashes of capitalism, was clearly a fruit of Marxism. As to the Russian temper which was committed to the principle "all or nothing", Niebuhr explained, Russia "knows nothing of Aristotle and his law of the golden mean" and "seems to do nothing by halves."<sup>59</sup> In other words, what he implied was, as Cornelius Krahn aptly summarized in his article "*Russia: Messianism-Marxism*", the typical Russian "is an absolutist and he dislikes a middle-of-the-road philosophy."<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> Niebuhr criticized Foster's book on many accounts, not least for "a large element of illusion in Forster's hopes". See Reinhold Niebuhr, "A Communist Manifesto", review of *Toward Soviet America*, by William Z. Foster, *The World Tomorrow*, Vol. 15, No. 15 (Oct 26, 1932), P. 404-405.

<sup>59</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Land of Extremes", P. 1241.

<sup>60</sup> Cornelius Krahn, "Russia: Messianism-Marxism", *Journal of Bible and Religion*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (July, 1963), P. 210.

Shortly after he came back from the Soviet Union, Niebuhr took up the same issue again. Why was communism thriving only in Russia when in the Western world it was still the religion of a rather small class of industrial helots, Niebuhr asked in “The Religion of Communism”. Extending his former reflections on this subject, he offered a more comprehensive analysis this time.

Historically, he argued, communism emerged in Russia on the back of the complete collapse of Russian society in the World War. This complete collapse, Niebuhr claimed, fitted more perfectly into the Marxist prophecies of doom than any fate likely to befall any modern nation. That the war facilitated the birth of communism in Russia is indisputable. However, did the collapse of an agrarian society really fit perfectly into the Marxist prophecies of doom? Not necessarily. But on this very controversial topic which divided the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks in Russia, Niebuhr seemed decidedly to be on the side of the former. While the Mensheviks cherished the theory that a socialist revolution was only possible in a country where capitalist industry had been fully developed, Bolsheviks like Lenin held that Russia could usher in communism without undergoing the scourge of capitalism. In this regard, Niebuhr remarked with appreciation, Lenin, the “creative spirit of Russian communism”, triumphed over those who could not conceive of a revolution until Russia had become ripe for it according to Marxist formula.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Religion of Communism”, P. 463.

Economically, Niebuhr reckoned, the rise of communism in Russia may be due to the complete absence of a middle class in that country, or “the formlessness and lack of prestige of the commercial middle class” as he later framed.<sup>62</sup> The polarized Russian society, a largely agrarian society, he explained, happened “by its backwardness to answer to the Marxian description of a developed industrial society in which there could be only exploiters and proletarians.”<sup>63</sup> In other words, although the number of the real “proletariats” in Russia at the turn of century was precious small, constituting only around 2.3% of the total population, time was nevertheless ripe in Russia for the dispossessed to rise up against the exploiters to seek justice and equality.<sup>64</sup> The reason, Niebuhr clearly believed, was that the situation in the backward agrarian Russia was the equivalent of a mature industrial economy that was on the verge of collapse as Marx prescribed. The final battle for an egalitarian society would in any event take place between the exploiter and the exploited. A polarized Russia clearly fitted into that pattern.

Last but not least, Niebuhr noted, the real cause for the emergence of communism in Russia lay in the psychological level. “The real explanation for the purity of the Marxian dogma and the energy of the Marxian program in Russia”, Niebuhr asserted, “must be found in psychological rather than economic and political causes”, for “Communist zeal, springing from a pure and unrelativized faith, has its real roots in the

---

<sup>62</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, P. 187.

<sup>63</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Religion of Communism”, P. 464.

<sup>64</sup> Mary-Barbara Zeldin, “The Religious Nature of Russian Marxism”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol.8, No. 1 (Spring, 1969). P. 106.

Russian soul, with its bent for religion.”<sup>65</sup> The Russian soul, he added, was the soul of an Asiatic rather than European nation. According to him, the Asiatic soul lacked intellectual sophistication, so much so that it inclined to elevate the tentative conclusions of a certain social philosophy to articles in a rigid religious creed, hence communism became the religion of the whole Russian nation. More importantly, Niebuhr argued, in Russia a whole nation was “still in a state of civilization in which pessimistic and apocalyptic ideas about the future were quite plausible, in which class hatred had more obvious historic justification than in any other country.”<sup>66</sup> Therefore, it was perfectly logical that communism as an apocalyptic religion that promised deliverance to the exploited would find Russia a fertile ground to take root and thrive in.

It is not surprising that Niebuhr would single out the “Russian soul” as the most important contributing factor to the rise of communism in Russia. As mentioned earlier, the peculiarity of the Russian soul already left its mark on Niebuhr’s mind during his trip where he felt “here, as elsewhere, the orient peeps through.”<sup>67</sup> The imposing domes of Russian Orthodox churches near the red square struck Niebuhr as “bizarre” for their “onion-like” shape. For him, the different sizes and colors of those “onions” evoked a feeling that ‘the fevered imagination sometimes summons in nightmare experiences.’<sup>68</sup> These churches, Niebuhr felt, were in a sense, of Russia itself. They conveyed a message that Russia did not belong to the western world and its mysticism was more otherworldly. Niebuhr’s impressions of the extreme-prone Russian soul, the imagination of which

---

<sup>65</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Religion of Communism”, P. 464.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, P. 465.

<sup>67</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Church in Russia”, P. 1114.

<sup>68</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Land of Extremes”, P. 1241.

stopped at nothing, were so strong that at the end of his trip he did not hesitate to classify it as one, though not the most important one, of the causes of Russian communism.

Niebuhr also revealed his preference for the Russian soul as the fundamental source of Russian communism in his appreciative book review entitled “The Epic of Russia”. Praising Hans von Eckardt’s book *Russia* as “a master piece of accurate and unbiased historical writing”, Niebuhr paid special attention to, or rather, read much into, the writer’s analysis pertaining to the Russian soul. He found Eckardt’s survey of Russian literature illuminating because it sketched the various tempers and moods through which “the Russian soul passed in its development toward the epochal event of 1917.”<sup>69</sup> After reading this survey, Niebuhr claimed, readers can see “how the religious soul of Russia was gradually transmuted into an instrument for the new kind of barbaric and heroic religiosity which communism expresses.”<sup>70</sup> The author’s account of the Nihilist movement also won Niebuhr’s appreciation. The Nihilist movement, Niebuhr observed, like bolshevism, “helped us to understand the Russian soul. It distilled cruelty and harm out of the sentimental Russian spirit and transmuted religion into irreligion.”<sup>71</sup>

Niebuhr was not alone in attributing the ultimate origin of Russian communism to the “Russian soul”. Nicolas Berdyaev, the famous Russian philosopher-theologian, who has been characterized by some as “the second Socrates”, was perhaps the most prominent

---

<sup>69</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Epic of Russia”, review of *Russia*, by Hans von Eckardt, *The World Tomorrow* Vol. 15, No. 6 (June 1932), P. 187.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

advocate of this theory.<sup>72</sup> In *The Origin of Russian Communism*, a book which Niebuhr himself reviewed appreciatively, Berdyaev argued that the communistic revolution in Russia was not primarily economic, political, and industrial; rather, it was religious, artistic, educational, and emotional in its totalitarian nature. Communism in Russia, according to Berdyaev, was deeply rooted in the Russian soul or Russian spirit which was characterized by its “dogmatism, asceticism, the ability to endure suffering and to make sacrifices for the sake of its faith whatever that may be, a reaching out to the transcendental, in relation now to eternity, to the other world, now to the future, to this world.”<sup>73</sup>

In this book, from the outset, Berdyaev reminded his readers that “the Russian people in their spiritual make-up are an Eastern people” and “the soul of the Russian people was shaped in a purely religious mould.”<sup>74</sup> Niebuhr would have heartily agreed with this observation. The religious energy of the Russian soul, Berdyaev declared, “possesses the faculty of switching over and directing itself to purposes which are not merely religious,” hence the communist zeal in transforming the Russian society and its aspiration to reshape the whole of life and human nature itself.<sup>75</sup> In reviewing Berdyaev’s book, Niebuhr clearly appreciated the significance of its thesis that the religious quality of the Russian soul transmuted the scientific social theories of the west into programs for religious messianism.<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> R. Balasubramanian, *The Personalistic Existentialism of Berdyaev* (Madras: University of Madras, 1970), viii.

<sup>73</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1960), P. 7.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, P. 7, P. 8.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, P. 9.

<sup>76</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, review of *The Origin of Russian Communism*, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Spring

At this point, it is interesting to note that besides *The Origins of Russian Communism*, Niebuhr also reviewed at least five other important works written by Berdyaev, namely, *Class War and Class Hatred*, *The Destiny of Man*, *The Meaning of History*, *Slavery and Freedom*, and *The Russian Idea*. There is also evidence that Niebuhr was familiar with Berdyaev's earlier works like *The Russian Revolution* and *The End of Our Time*. While it is difficult to discern to what extent Berdyaev influenced Niebuhr, it is clear to me that at least Niebuhr shared much of Berdyaev's criticisms of communism as a religion. I will elaborate on this in the next chapter. For now, suffice to note that the two theologians had much in common: both were prolific writers; both were once Marxists; both became prominent critics of communism after discarding Marxism; both despite their significant contributions to Christian theology in the twentieth century, disclaimed to be a theologian.<sup>77</sup> Perhaps the most striking thing about the two great religious thinkers was the fact that they chose almost identical titles for some of their works. Thus while Niebuhr wrote books like *Reflections on the End of an Era* and *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Berdyaev produced works like *The End of Our Time* and *The Destiny of Man*.

While Niebuhr took the spiritual force of the Russian soul, rather than the historical and economic conditions as the ultimate origin of Russian communism, he did not ignore other important factors like the ineptness of the Russian aristocratic bureaucracy, the political defenselessness of the peasants, the revolutionary solidarity of the worker and

---

1938), P.46.

<sup>77</sup> James C.S. Wernham, *Two Russian Thinkers: An Essay in Berdyaev and Shestov* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), P. 3.

the political cynicism produced by a moribund state.<sup>78</sup> In particular, Niebuhr singled out the special role that great leaders like Lenin, “the greatest figure in Russian political history,”<sup>79</sup> played in turning communism into reality.

As mentioned previously, in appreciation of Lenin’s realism, Niebuhr regarded him as the “creative spirit of Russian communism”, in the sense that unlike those Mensheviks, Lenin did not fall victim to the economic determinism of Marxist dogma. “The Russian revolution was fashioned by a small group who knew just where they were going,” Niebuhr once observed, but “of those men Lenin was the leader who was most definite about the goal and most realistic in choosing the means which would lead to it.”<sup>80</sup> In reviewing Leon Trotsky’s *The History of the Russian Revolution*, Niebuhr also agreed with the author’s view that Lenin played a paramount role in the ultimate triumph of communism in Russia.<sup>81</sup> Overall, in tracing the origins of Russian communism, Niebuhr fully recognized Lenin’s great leadership, which in his view, was “achieved and maintained by the superiority of his realistic intelligence and the vigor of his will.”<sup>82</sup> He also appreciated Lenin’s gift for compromise and strategy as a great statesman. He disliked those who deliberately portrayed Lenin as a kind of ruthless and unprincipled tyrant. Because of this, he dismissed Ferdinand Ossendowski’s book *Lenin, God of the Godless* as “practically worthless” and “a book to feed prejudices but not to enlighten

---

<sup>78</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, P. 187.

<sup>79</sup> Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (Ann Harbor: University of Michigan Press, 1932), P. 1191.

<sup>80</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Life of Lenin”, Review of *Lenin, God of the Godless*, by Ferdinand Ossendowski, and *Lenin, Red Dictator*, by George Vernadsky, *The World Tomorrow*, Vol. 14, No. 8 (Aug. 1931), P. 265.

<sup>81</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Events and the Man”, review of Leon Trotsky’s *The History of the Russian Revolution*, *The World Tomorrow*, Vol. 15, No. 7 (July 1932), P. 210.

<sup>82</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The life of Lenin”, P. 266.

minds.”<sup>83</sup> But on the other hand, although he acknowledged the prominent role of great men on the historical stage, Niebuhr also believed that “what happened in Russia was due neither to historical caprice nor to the genius of one man.”<sup>84</sup> Therefore, he had no stomach for any idolatry of Lenin. Thus when Waldo Frank described his visit to Lenin’s tomb in his book *Dawn in Russia*, Niebuhr blasted the author’s sentimentality in “reading so much meaning into or out a dead man’s hands” as offensive.”<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, P. 265.

<sup>84</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Events and the Man”, P. 210.

<sup>85</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Waldo Frank in Russia”, review of *Dawn in Russia*, by Waldo Frank, *The World Tomorrow*, Vol. 15, No. 9 ( Sept 14), P. 262.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Toward a Christian Political Ethic: Late 1930s**

The previous chapter examined how Niebuhr's attachment to Marxism gradually increased, thanks to his engagement with the Soviet Union, despite all his skepticism and criticisms about the Great Experiment. Labelling communism, or Marxism's application in the Soviet Union as a religion, Niebuhr saw clearly in this religion a great challenge to Christianity on both political and spiritual planes. Already a dominant voice in the Protestant circle by mid-1930s, how did Niebuhr respond to this challenge? And what kind of impact did his struggle with this challenge have on him? This chapter, contents of which span the later part of the 1930s, attempts to answer these questions, thereby revealing how Niebuhr the socialist Christian inched towards a more conservative Christian political ethic.

In general, the challenge of Russian communism affected Niebuhr in three fundamental ways. First, the overwhelming enthusiasm that communism provoked by its social objective, namely the establishment of a just and equal society, made Niebuhr more acutely aware of the impotency of Western Christianity, which was already laid bare by the social ills of Western society. As a crucial step towards formulating Christian realism, Niebuhr lashed out at Christianity for its failure in tackling social and political problems in the mid-1930s, while at the same time displaying greater appreciation for

Marxism's espousal of justice. The launch of *Radical Religion* in 1935 was itself a perfect example of Niebuhr's effort in this regard. Second, it was his intuition concerning the ideals of communism as mythology that led him to seek a deeper understanding of myth and meaning, which in turn contributed greatly to his realistic theology – myth and meaning came to form the central category in Niebuhr's theology. I have shown how Niebuhr's interpretation of faith itself deepened as a result of his engagement with Russian communism. Proceeding along this vein, this chapter will scrutinize how Niebuhr began to view Christianity as an edifice of meaning, with myths as its bedrock. Last but not least, the blatant self-righteousness embedded in communism, coupled with the brutalities of the Soviet regime that were gradually revealed by the ruthless purges and Moscow Trials, was one decisive force in driving him to rediscover "sin", the linchpin of his realistic theology.<sup>1</sup>

### **Criticisms of Christianity**

In the mid-1930s, Niebuhr had little doubt that any attempt in tinkering with the capitalist system was bound to be in vain. Deeply skeptical about President Roosevelt's ability to make a decisive turnaround, he dismissed the "New Deal" as a kind of "whirligig reform" when it was initiated. In fact, he still enjoyed taking a swipe at the President's "merry-go-round" policy as late as in 1938.<sup>2</sup> One of the main reasons why Niebuhr was so slow to endorse the New Deal in the mid-30s was that he still saw Marxism as a very attractive political strategy, despite his apprehensions about the perils, in particular, the

---

<sup>1</sup> See "Sin Rediscovered", *Time* magazine (Monday, March 24, 1941).

<sup>2</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Roosevelt's Merry-Go-Round", *Radical Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Spring 1938), P. 4.

vindictiveness of communism that had begun to mount. Recent history, it seemed to him, proved to be a good validation of Marxism's critique of capitalism. Subscribing to the Marxist prognosis of the economic and political ills of capitalism, he even predicted, rather gloomily, that "in spite of the weaknesses of Marxism as a religion, and a political strategy, it may conquer Christianity and become the dominant religion of our industrial civilization."<sup>3</sup>

Niebuhr was attracted to the Marxist political strategy even though he obviously did not relish that kind of prospect as a Christian theologian. In his view, if that were to come to pass, the world would in some respects return to barbarism. To ward off such a scenario, what should be done to revive Christianity so that it could rise up to the challenge of the communist religion? In other words, to counter the challenge of communism, to tackle the pressing political and social problems of contemporary capitalist society, a viable Christian political ethic was urgently needed. How could such a Christian political ethic be fostered? This was the task that Niebuhr set himself from mid-1930s onwards.

Claiming that the conflict between Christianity and communism was "a contest between a religion with an inadequate political strategy and a social idealism which falsely raised a political strategy to the heights of religion," Niebuhr regarded tackling Christianity's own political inadequacies as the first step toward constructing such a viable Christian political ethic.<sup>4</sup> In his opinion, the political failure of Christianity was partly to blame for the emergence of communism in the Western world in the first place. Thus armed

---

<sup>3</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Christian Politics and Communist Religion", in *Christianity and the Social Revolution*, edited by John Lewis, Karl Polanyi and D. K. Kitchin (London: Victor Gollancz, 1935), P. 468.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, P. 442.

with the idea that communism was strongest where Christianity was weakest, namely, with regard to the analysis of political realities, Niebuhr levelled strong criticisms against Christianity for the latter's failure to engage with contemporary political and economic problems. These insightful criticisms of Christianity first appeared in an article entitled "Christian Politics and Communist Religion" (1935) and his book *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935). Niebuhr continued to grapple with the problem regarding the role of Christianity in the political arena till the end of his life, but the notion underpinning Christian realism, namely, that equal justice, an approximation of the law of love was the highest achievable ideal in politics had already been cemented in his pungent criticisms of Christianity during this period.

In Niebuhr's view, with sacrificial love as its moral ideal, Christianity faced inherent difficulties in dealing with political realities where moral ideas were intertwined with the practical necessities of conflict and coercion. As a result, Christianity had in general been more of a source of confusion in political and social ethics than a source of guidance. The root cause for this, he argued, was that Christianity's primary concern lay in achieving moral purity in the life of the individuals, not the establishment of justice in society. Christians constantly lived under the tension between human egoism and the ideal of love in their individual lives. But the problem was, "The social and political order lives under the tension of the ideal of justice and the facts of injustice."<sup>5</sup> In other words, justice, not love, represented the highest ideal in the realm of politics. Therefore, "the problem of politics and economics is the problem of justice."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in politics,

---

<sup>5</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Christian Politics and Communist Religion", P. 445.

<sup>6</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (London, SCM Press, 1936). P. 150.

the establishment of justice inevitably involved conflict and coercion. “Any realistic analysis of political life is bound to recognize the inevitability of conflict and coercion in man’s collective enterprises.”<sup>7</sup> Conflict was necessary because relative justice hinged on pitting interests against interests so as to achieve a degree of equality and stability. Coercion was necessary because society must hold in check the inordinate egoism of individuals and groups alike. In a word, the question of politics was “how to coerce the anarchy of conflicting human interests into some kind of order, offering human beings the greatest possible opportunity for mutual support.”<sup>8</sup> Christianity, because of its overriding concern with moral purity, therefore, ran the risk of being irrelevant to the necessities of social life. Historically, due to its absolutism and perfectionism, Christianity had indeed proven inadequate when confronted with the issue of justice in society. Such was the general framework in which Niebuhr took issues with Christian orthodoxy, Asceticism and Liberalism.

With regard to Christian orthodoxy, Niebuhr charged, both Catholicism and Protestantism deemed the law of love as not fully applicable to the world of politics where conflicts and coercion were inherent. By doing so, the orthodox Christian church in effect acknowledged that egoism, as embodied in the conflicts of interests in any society, must be chastised as sin, and must be taken for granted in man’s collective behavior. This, compared to the romanticism of Liberal Christianity, represented a wholesome political realism on the part of Christian orthodoxy. Perfectionist as it was,

---

<sup>7</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Christian Politics and Communist Religion”, P. 453.

<sup>8</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, P. 150.

the orthodox Christian church did not harbor the illusion that the law of love could transmute the realities of politics in a “world of sin.”

However, Niebuhr pointed out, this political realism of Christian orthodoxy did not constitute an adequate political strategy. By drawing a clear line between the realms of politics and ethics, Christian orthodoxy failed to derive any significant politico-moral principles from the law of love. This meant, Christian orthodoxy had not realized that “the law of love is not only in position of ultimate transcendence over all moral achievements, but that it suggests possibilities which immediately transcend any achievements of justice by which society has integrated its life.”<sup>9</sup> The result was, it jeopardized the dynamic relationship between the ideal of love in morality and the principle of justice in politics. Furthermore, by disavowing the ideal of love and equality as a possibility in the political order, Christian orthodoxy also forfeited an effective source of criticism for the injustices of politics and economics. “Conceptions of justice which are not disciplined by ideals of equality inevitably sink into the sand of complete relativism or contemporary conventions.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, for Christian orthodoxy, justice merely meant that “social relations should be ordered and decent within terms of the presuppositions of this society.”<sup>11</sup> The upshot was, historically, Christian orthodoxy often took the hierarchical structure of a given society for granted and accepted its social inequalities and injustice as “natural”. Thus Catholic social ethics gave religious sanction to the feudal social structure, while in similar fashion, Protestantism became the servant to modern capitalism.

---

<sup>9</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*. P. 154.

<sup>10</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Christian Politics and Communist Religion”, P. 447.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Christian Orthodoxy's inadequacy in upholding the principle of justice was best reflected in its attitude toward the State. Driven by the Pauline conception of the divine ordinance of government and the Stoic conception of the natural law, both Orthodox Catholicism and Protestantism justified the coercive and even violent methods which the State used to maintain its authority and social cohesion.<sup>12</sup> However, while in Catholicism the scriptural sanctification of government was tempered by its effort to maintain the authority and prestige of the Church as superior to that of the State, Protestantism uncritically sided with the established government while at the same time rigorously prohibited every type of rebellious coercion and violence. In this regard, Niebuhr observed, the political ethic of both Luther and Calvin was particularly wedded to the state, for on the one hand, they enjoined the purest pacifism upon the citizen, while on the other hand, they absolved the rulers of every moral scruple in their use of violence. Overall, Niebuhr charged, the orthodox Protestant teaching, both Lutheran and Calvinistic, had been on the side of the State and against rebellion, with its effect still being perceptible in contemporary Christian thought. This trend, for Niebuhr, who already openly justified the use of force in overthrowing the capitalist system in his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, obviously represented primary hurdles on the road to justice and needed to be removed.

Making compromises with the entrenched interests of a society, not only caused confusion, but also created a rebellion within orthodox Christianity that challenged the compromises it made. This rebellion, Niebuhr pointed out, was staged by the monastic

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, P. 450, see also, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, P. 154, P. 164.

movement in the medieval Church and the sects in the Protestant Church respectively, with the former being ascetic and the latter being semi-ascetic. In the case of asceticism, a craving for individual moral purity, especially emancipation from egoism became the dominant driving force for the individuals. Though withdrawal from political relations was itself a proof of its realism, asceticism on the whole remained an irrelevance to the broader socio-moral problems of a society, because human society “must always be more interested in the attainment of a basic justice in all relations than in an individual perfection.”<sup>13</sup> The semi-asceticism, or the protest against the compromises of the orthodox Church in Protestantism was presented by sectarians, i.e. Anabaptists, levellers, Brownists, Diggers, Mennonites, and Quakers, etc.<sup>14</sup> While these sects did not disavow the ordinary relations of life for the sake of perfection in morality, they had on the whole been forced into asceticism when it came to politics, often embodied by its principle of non-resistance. Therefore, like asceticism, semi-asceticism was equally irrelevant to the social problems of human society, despite its aspiration for equalitarianism.

Christian orthodoxy, asceticism and semi-asceticism had all been proved inadequate or irrelevant in securing justice. How about Christian liberalism? If the orthodox erroneously dismissed the relevancy of law of love for politics, Niebuhr observed, the modern liberal Church erred in the other direction: it declared the law of love to be relevant to politics without any qualification. Liberalism, basking in its sentimental illusions, “insisted upon the direct application of the principles of the Sermon the Mount to the problems of politics and economics as the only way of salvation for a sick

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. P. 456.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

society.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, Liberalism, inheriting its optimism and rationalism from the Enlightenment, was overtly confident that once the gospel of love could be preached adequately, all the social ills of modern society would automatically go away. By envisaging a new society that was practically identical with the Kingdom of God, supposedly achievable by gradual evolutionary process, Liberalism failed to grasp the inertia of sin in human history, and the inevitability of conflict and injustice in economic and political life.<sup>16</sup> The consequences were, Niebuhr argued, the liberal Church had obscured rather than revealed the social realities of modern society. In effect, Liberalism had compromised more seriously with the prejudices and interests of a commercial civilization by accommodating the Christian faith to the naturalism of the era. Viewed in this light, it naturally followed that the effort by Liberalism to apply the gospel ethic rigorously to political and economic realm as a practical guide to establish justice was no less a failure than orthodoxy, asceticism or semi-asceticism. If in his previous Marxist work like *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, driven by his lingering optimism about the goodness of “moral man” Niebuhr did not yet break away completely from liberalism, it was abundantly clear that he would have none of it in the mid-1930s.

It needs to be stressed that Niebuhr’s broadsides against Christianity with regard to its failure to answer to political and economic problems were accompanied and to some extent, inspired by his appreciation for the political realism of communism. If previously he appeared to be more impressed with the apocalyptic vision of communism, which in

---

<sup>15</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, P. 179.

<sup>16</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Christian Politics and Communist Religion”, P. 459.

his view bore the clear imprint of Jewish-Christian religion, in the mid-1930s, what appealed more to him was the realistic strain of communism as a political strategy.

In the middle of the decade, Niebuhr firmly believed that Marxism's analyses of the technical aspects of the problem of justice had not been successfully challenged. Acknowledging that Marxism's catastrophic interpretation of the destiny of modern society was validated by many facts of contemporary history, he came to see communism as more of "an interesting combination of cynical political realism with a religious hope."<sup>17</sup> The realism of communism, he observed, was no different from that of a Hobbes or a Machiavelli in the sense that "it knows that politics and economics is a contest of power and interest, and that no pure moral idealism will ever establish justice in the world."<sup>18</sup> Communism's theory of class struggle, in his view, was deeply rooted in its superior understanding of the nature of politics and economics. Furthermore, he even seemed to suggest, that communism's dream of establishing perfect justice in a classless society was also superior to the ideal of Christianity, in the sense that communism's ideal was the social ideal of equal justice rather than love. The reason, he explained, was that

"Justice is inevitably the highest ideal for social life, as love is the highest ideal of the pure soul. Furthermore, equal justice was the inevitable symbol of perfect justice. Perfect equality might be as unattainable in history as perfect love; yet it must remain the regulative principle of justice and the perspective from which every concrete achievement in justice is assessed."<sup>19</sup>

This was by far Niebuhr's clearest formulation of one pillar of Christian realism, that is, the dialectic relation between love and justice. Again, it is significant that Niebuhr made

---

<sup>17</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Christian Politics and Communist Religion", P. 461.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, P. 463.

all these observations in the context of asserting the validity of Marxism in terms of its realistic approach to the problem of justice. As Dennis McCann suggested, the impact of Marxism on Niebuhr was evident in the basic categories of the social ethics of Christian realism, namely, “love and justice.”<sup>20</sup>

In the mid-1930s, it seemed obvious to Niebuhr that Christianity paled in comparison with communism when it came to achieving the goal of equal justice in modern society. Given the appreciation he evinced for the Marxist political strategy, it is no exaggeration to say that as a religion, communism’s espousal of justice provided the prototype of the kind of political realism that he had been looking for. This was why, despite its inadequacy as a religion, he believed that Marxism “has much to commend it, both as a political strategy and as a religion.”<sup>21</sup> As a political strategy, it seemed to him, Marxism was based upon a realism that had been justified by contemporary history. As a religion, Marxism provided valuable insights into life and history which had been ignored in modern Christianity, thereby setting “a moral and social goal for the ethical life which is relevant to the necessities of modern society.”<sup>22</sup> It should be easy to identify what Niebuhr meant by “a moral and social goal” that was necessary to address the problems of the day in this context: it was nothing but the principle of justice, the core of a viable Christian political ethic.

---

<sup>20</sup> Dennis McCann, “Reinhold Niebuhr and Jacques Maritain on Marxism: A Comparison of Two Traditional Models of Practical Theology”, *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (Apr. 1978), P. 152.

<sup>21</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Christian Politics and Communist Religion”, P. 463.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

## Theologians and Communism

At this point, it is appropriate to take a look at the views of other prominent Christian thinkers with regard to the challenge of communism and how Niebuhr reacted to them. The purpose is to put Niebuhr's engagement with communism into the broader context of the intellectual encounter between Christianity and communism. To be sure, in the camp of Christian thinkers, Niebuhr was not alone in feeling the pressing need to deal with the challenge of communism. But in terms of their attitudes toward communism, as will be shown, Niebuhr's realistic approach doubtless stood out against those of other Christian thinkers such as Paul Tillich, Emil Brunner, Karl Barth, and Nicholas Berdyaev, whom I have discussed in the previous chapter.

Paul Tillich's encounter with communism, as Charles West summarized, was that of "an inner affinity with Marx's doctrine of self-estrangement against the background of his own struggle with the problem of autonomy and heteronomy."<sup>23</sup> Tillich, being a philosopher-theologian, viewed Marxism primarily as a total philosophy of life. Unlike Tillich, who saw the social-ethical problem of the working man through the prism of Marxist philosophy, Niebuhr related this problem directly to contemporary experience and found Marxism a useful, if not completely practical guide in its analysis of modern capitalist society. On a deeper level, I believe, the difference in their attitudes towards communism can be traced to their different approaches to ontology, especially with regard to the notion of "sin". To take one example. Tillich once observed that "The

---

<sup>23</sup> Charles. C. West, *Communism and the Theologians: Study of an Encounter* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958), P. 123.

myth of ‘the transcendent fall’ described the transition (from essence to existence) as a universal event in ontological terms.”<sup>24</sup> Niebuhr retorted by construing Fall as primarily an ontological one rather than a historical one, Tillich in effect emphasized the fatefulness of sin rather than the responsibility of man.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the political disengagement entailed by his ontological interpretation of Sin could not be more revealing when Tillich declared that religious socialism was not applicable to the foreseeable future; that Christians should wait in a “sacred void” without attempts at premature solutions.<sup>26</sup> The direct result of this political disengagement, as Robert Banks pointed out, was that it prevented Tillich from developing a relevant critique of communism in the post-war period.<sup>27</sup> I shall elaborate on Niebuhr’s own approach to sin later on.

Emil Brunner, whose book *Man in Revolt* was a significant source of inspiration for Niebuhr himself, found in communism the incarnation of an evil principle. Communism, for this famous Swiss theologian, was the most consistent embodiment of the principle of totalitarianism in history, even more consistent than that of Nazism. In his view, Marx was ultimately to blame for the denial of human dignity in communist Russia. Moreover, Brunner regarded the fundamental Marxist tenets as individualist, equalitarian, progressivist and rationalist presuppositions springing from the anthropological views of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Recent history after

---

<sup>24</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Biblical Thought and Ontological Speculation in Tillich’s Theology”, in Charles W. Kegley & Robert W. Bretall edited, *The Theology of Paul Tillich* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), P. 220.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, P. 219.

<sup>26</sup> Eduard Heimann, “Tillich’s Doctrine of Religious Socialism”, in *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, P. 324.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Banks, “The Intellectual Encounter between Christianity and Marxism: A Contribution to the Pre-History of a Dialogue”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 11, No. 23 (July 1976). P. 317.

the rise of communism therefore should be interpreted essentially as a deviation from Reformation insights on the nature of man and the social order.<sup>28</sup> Siding with Brunner in acknowledging the profound Reformation insights on human nature, Niebuhr nevertheless viewed Brunner's rejection of the anthropological views of Renaissance and the Enlightenment and its child Marxism as conservative and bordering upon reactionary. This total rejection, it seemed to Niebuhr, was as if throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

In fact, in his criticisms against Christian orthodoxy, Niebuhr singled out Brunner for his excessive fear of chaos and obsession with order. While Brunner was of the view that "the projection of ideal (political) programs is not only useless, but harmful, because it creates illusions, dissipated moral energy and tempts its proponents to become self-righteous critics of their fellows," Niebuhr argued that such a belief "obviates any possibility of a Christian justification of social change."<sup>29</sup> In the realm of politics, for Niebuhr, as my analysis has shown, justice, not order, was the highest ideal that Christians should strive for. A complete lack of ideal and an obsession with order, can be equally harmful in the sense that they would sap the will of seeking social changes and ultimately, justice. In light of this, it seemed to Niebuhr that Brunner's rejection of Marxism as a sinister enemy in fact rendered a disservice to Christianity in tackling contemporary political and economic problems.

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, P. 324.

<sup>29</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, P. 166 -167.

As for Karl Barth, before the rise of Fascism, he was preoccupied with purely theological pursuits and paid little attention to Marxism. It was only after 1933 that his social and political writings began to exclusively focus on his criticisms of totalitarian Nazism.<sup>30</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s, Religious Socialism for Barth was primarily a question of faith and philosophy.<sup>31</sup> Only after World War II that Barth began to pay attention to pressing social problems like the role of Christianity under the communist regime and the attitude of the West towards the communist world.<sup>32</sup> Overall, it can be said that Barth's direct interest in Marxism and the ethical problem of the economic world was very slight in his encounter with socialism and Marxism. His most decisive contribution to the encounter with Marxism lay in his general theological approach. As West pointed out, despite his peripheral interest in Marxism, in a deeper sense, Barth remained a contemporary of Karl Marx; "a cousin who did not know him," but who shared with him the same spiritual heritage and the same revolutionary drive against the pretensions and complacency of modern society.<sup>33</sup> Essentially, therefore, Barth's challenge to Marx rested in his attempt to present systematic theological answers to the same problems that drove Marx to devise his own system.

In Niebuhr's view, Barth's attempt to place a new theological reality against the world bordered on "theological isolationism."<sup>34</sup> While Niebuhr deemed Barth's neo-orthodox theology as a very profound correction to the optimistic and complacent liberal

---

<sup>30</sup> Robert Banks, "The Intellectual Encounter between Christianity and Marxism", P. 319.

<sup>31</sup> Charles West, *Communism and the Theologians*, P. 179.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Banks, "The Intellectual Encounter between Christianity and Marxism", P. 319.

<sup>33</sup> Charles West, *Communism and the Theologians*, P. 188-189.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas E. McCollough, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Karl Barth on the Relevance of Theology", *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Jan., 1963), P. 53.

Protestantism, he nevertheless had long been critical of Barthian theology for its Biblical liberalism and in particular, its exclusive emphasis upon the idea of the partiality and relativity of all human values and all social forces. In the mid-1930s, Niebuhr charged that the Barthian theology was politically enervating and it was “perilously near the dualism of neo-Platonism in which all historic reality and concrete existence is robbed of meaning.”<sup>35</sup> On another occasion in mid-1930s, Niebuhr criticized Barth as being too Christocentric and hostile to any secular criteria of justice, so much so that he had no social ethic.<sup>36</sup> The culmination and summation of Niebuhr’s criticism of Barth was perhaps best expressed in Niebuhr’s article on “How My Mind Has Changed” in *Christian Century*:

“Barth has long since ceased to have any effect on my thought; indeed he has become irrelevant to all Christians in the Western world who believe in accepting common and collective responsibilities without illusion and without despair. We cannot protect the truth of the gospel by separating it from all the disciplines of culture and all the common experiences of our ethical life.”<sup>37</sup>

In comparison, Nicolas Berdyaev’s approach to Marxism perhaps was the most similar one to that of Niebuhr’s among these theologians. According to Charles West, it was Berdyaev “who first understood and expounded Marxism and Communism as a religious movement, with all that this implies.”<sup>38</sup> Robert Banks credited Berdyaev with being the Christian thinker whose insights informed “the most effective encounter” between Christianity and communism.<sup>39</sup> The value of Berdyaev’s great insights certainly did not

---

<sup>35</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Christian Politics and Communist Religion”, P. 466.

<sup>36</sup> Roger L. Shinn, “Realism, Radicalism, and Eschatology in Reinhold Niebuhr: A Reassessment”, *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (Oct. 1974), P. 419.

<sup>37</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Quality of Our Lives”, article in “How My Mind Has Changed” series, *The Christian Century*, Vol. 77, No. 19 (May 11, 1960), P. 571.

<sup>38</sup> Charles West, *Communism and the Theologians*, P. 111.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Banks, “The Intellectual Encounter between Christianity and Marxism”, P. 319.

lose on Niebuhr, for starting from the early 1930s, Niebuhr himself spared no effort in introducing Berdyaev's works to American readers. More sensitive to the religious strain in Marxism than his contemporaries, Berdyaev regarded Karl Marx as "a theologian of a sort" and branded Marxism as "not only a science and politics; it is also a faith, a religion."<sup>40</sup> Overall, like Niebuhr, Berdyaev endorsed Marx's analysis of capitalist society and his prediction of its eventual collapse, his formulation of class ideology and revolution. Berdyaev also advocated that communism should be taken seriously as a historical challenge and a pseudo-religious alternative to Christianity. All these aspects clearly bear resemblance of Niebuhr's perceptions to the religion of communism in the 1930s.

The two Christian thinkers had much in common, especially on the issue that the "Russian soul" lay at the root of Russian communism. However, Niebuhr's approach to communism in general was more realistic than that of Berdyaev's. While Niebuhr saw Marxism primarily as a useful guide in its economic analysis of capitalist society and in its espousal of justice and equality, Berdyaev's engagement with Marxism was on a more spiritual plane, owing to his existentialist idealism and mysticism. "The soul of Marxism", Berdyaev once wrote, lay "not in its economic determinism."<sup>41</sup> Marxism, in Berdyaev's view, was ultimately a doctrine "of deliverance, of the messianic vocation of the proletariat, of the future perfect society in which man would not be dependent on economics, of the power and victory of man over the irrational forces of nature and

---

<sup>40</sup> Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism*, P. 96.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, P. 98.

society.”<sup>42</sup> That was where the soul of Marxism existed. In other words, Berdyaev insisted that Marxism’s real strength was based on its essence as a religion which held out the promise of delivering the proletariat out of bondage, not its economic determinism. One critic, Henry Wieman, who was also a critic of Niebuhr, rightly pointed out that this revealed Berdyaev’s “otherworldliness, mysticism, and transcendentalism.”<sup>43</sup> Niebuhr himself was also critical of this kind of transcendentalism and idealism in Berdyaev’s works. Commenting on Berdyaev’s book *Class War and Class Hatred*, which put forth that Christians were not opposed to class war but to class hatred, Niebuhr remarked that “I am somewhat in doubt as to whether a great social struggle can be spiritualized as much as Berdyaev hopes.”<sup>44</sup> Speaking as a “Marxian realist”, Niebuhr stated that “there will be elements of vindictiveness in every historic movement against established injustice. The Christian who fully understands the tragic character of man’s social life will neither refuse to participate in a social struggle because these elements are in it, nor yet will he call evil good.”<sup>45</sup> The difference between Niebuhr’s realism and Berdyaev’s existentialist idealism which underlay their respective philosophies could not have been more revealing.

This sketch of all these ablest Christian thinkers’ encounters with communism by no means does them justice. Nevertheless, it still provides a broad intellectual context in which the uniqueness of Niebuhr’s realistic theology can be better understood.

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Henry Nelson Wieman, review of *The Origin of Russian Communism*, *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 18, No. 4 ( Oct. 1938), P.438.

<sup>44</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Class War and Class Hatred”, *The World Tomorrow*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Jan 4, 1934), P. 21.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

## **The Need for a Radical Religion**

Christianity, despite its high moral ground, failed to provide a useful guide to modern societies that were beset by injustice and inequality. Communism, although appearing to be more equipped to tackle the ills of capitalism, was nevertheless fraught with fanaticism and brutality. Contemporary Christian theologians, it seemed to Niebuhr, had not engaged with communism in a fruitful way so as to revitalize Christianity and thereby furnish a viable Christian political ethic which should strike a balance between the moral ideal of love and the ideal of justice in politics. The above introduction of Niebuhr's criticisms of Christianity and the sketch of how other great Christian thinkers wrestled with the challenge of communism thus paved the way for a closer look at Niebuhr's own effort in fighting "on two fronts both for radicalism and for an adequate religion" as a Socialist Christian.<sup>46</sup>

As mentioned previously, Niebuhr's attitude towards communism had been quite mixed. It shifted in response to relevant political and economic developments in the Soviet Union. But in general, it can be said that his approach to communism was marked by a strenuous effort to tackle it as a serious challenge to Christianity, both spiritually and politically. At the beginning of his direct encounter with it, communism struck Niebuhr as being both a vibrant political scheme and a dangerously popular pseudo-religion. His reaction to this communist religion had therefore been evolving along the lines of drawing on the strengths of its political vitality while at the same time sparing no effort in combating the menace of its religious appeal. This trend was evident during his trip to

---

<sup>46</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "God and Piece Work", *Radical Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring 1936), P. 6.

the Soviet Union. His balanced approach to communism was also reflected in his article “The Problem of Communist Religion”. Although never tolerant of the brutalities and vindictiveness of the communist religion, Niebuhr nevertheless cautioned that piercing the pretensions of the communist movement did not mean that all the social values and objectives of communism should be treated as equally insignificant or irrelevant, as some Christian theologians did.<sup>47</sup> The right attitude in dealing with the pretensions of communism, he observed, was that “we may deny the communist belief that the proletariat is a messianic class and still insist that the workers of the world are a class with a very fateful mission.”<sup>48</sup> This realistic attitude captured the core of Niebuhr’s general approach to communism in the first half of the 1930s.

Niebuhr’s active engagement with communism was bound to influence his political and theological horizons. By the time *Reflections on the End of an Era* came out, he had already decided that adequate spiritual guidance can only come through a combination of a more radical political strategy and more classical religious convictions. This radical political strategy, he made it clear in this book, must be Marxian-oriented in its essentials.<sup>49</sup> As to the more conservative religious convictions, by placing an emphasis on the political realism of Christian orthodoxy, this book suggested that Niebuhr was edging towards a so-called neo-orthodoxy religious stance, in the sense that the notion of “sin” was to feature more prominently in his theology. The task for Niebuhr, therefore, was to work out a viable Christian political ethic which could draw on the strengths of Marxism and Christianity, yet at the same time avoid the deficiencies of both.

---

<sup>47</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Problem of Communist Religion”, P. 379.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era*, P. 177.

If *Reflections on the End of an Era* signalled Niebuhr's move towards an adequate Christian political ethic, the conclusion that he drew in the article "Christian Politics and Communist Religion" could be seen as a milestone in this regard. Having exposed the inadequacies of Christian orthodox, Liberal Christianity, asceticism and semi-asceticism, Niebuhr asserted that Christianity was nevertheless still able to nurture a political ethic which "inspires men to the attainment of justice without sacrificing the values of its love perfectionism."<sup>50</sup> The ideal of love was beyond the possibilities of history. But perfect love must remain the ultimate ideal of Christian morality from which all concrete moral achievements in history can be judged and guided. Most importantly, justice was the most significant approximation of the ideal of love in politics and economics. The solution, therefore, Niebuhr observed, was for the Church to correct its error and establish a political ethic "which will borrow from, and affirm, the validity of many of the basic tenets of Marxian politics."<sup>51</sup> Such an ethic, he believed, would be able to relate the heights of pure religion to the depths of political and economic realm, thereby providing a practical guide to western societies that were gripped by spiritual crises.

It is clear, therefore, that from the mid-1930s, Niebuhr's realistic theology began to take its shape, taking the form of a Christian political ethic which at this point endorsed many of the basic tenets of Marxian politics, not least its espousal of justice. As a concrete move, the launch of *Radical Religion* in 1935 was a perfect reflection of Niebuhr's

---

<sup>50</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Christian Politics and Communist Religion", P. 471.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

continued effort to inject political realism into Christianity and bring it to bear upon the social problems of the tumultuous times.

In the early 1930s, Niebuhr and other like-minded Christians established the Fellowship of Socialist Christians (FSC) to replace the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation. From the beginning, FSC adopted a distinctly radical orientation. It shared Marxism's analysis of class struggle and its belief in the inevitability of coercion in social struggles. In the fall of 1935, FSC launched its new mouthpiece - *Radical Religion* - which was eventually changed to *Christianity and Society* in 1940. There was absolutely no doubt as to who was instrumental in this venture. As Richard Fox observed, "Niebuhr was the FSC: head organizer, editorial director, guiding spirit, perennial leader by silent acclamation."<sup>52</sup> Indeed, this new quarterly became very much Niebuhr's personal megaphone in the following years. The name FSC chose for this magazine was clearly indicative of Niebuhr's own effort in seeking a "vital religion", or "prophet religion" as he termed it. The views that Niebuhr expressed in the pages of *Radical Religion* represented "the highest fruits of Niebuhr's encounter as a Christian with the fullness of revolutionary Marxist faith and criticism in the thirties."<sup>53</sup> The journal itself was short lived. But as Fox pointed out, after 1935 it essentially led the way "in redefining the agenda for liberal and radical Christians."<sup>54</sup> *Radical Religion* folded, not accidentally, roughly at the same time that Niebuhr quit the Socialist Party. This issue will be taken up in the following chapter.

---

<sup>52</sup> Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, P. 167.

<sup>53</sup> Charles West, *Communism and the Theologians*, P. 136.

<sup>54</sup> Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, P. 168.

The inaugural editorial of *Radical Religion* - a statement of mission in essence - perfectly encapsulated Niebuhr's stand on how a fruitful encounter between Christianity and Marxism should be. It also outlined the task of a "prophet religion". Declaring that this new quarterly was devoted to "radical Christianity", Niebuhr claimed that the mission of this "venture of faith" was to "clarify the affinities and divergences in Marxian and Christian thought."<sup>55</sup> Speaking as a "socialist Christian", he explained that the need for a Christian espousal of socialism was largely due to a conviction that "there is no hope of social justice in the old individualism."<sup>56</sup> The underlying message of this statement was clear: a vital religion should strive to uphold the principle of social justice and Marxism, despite its utopianism, pointed out a way of achieving it. Yet in light of the temptation of a complete capitulation to Marxian dogma on the part of young American Christians who were disillusioned with liberalism, Niebuhr noted, it was necessary to develop a "discriminating" relationship between Christianity and Marxism and analyze their respective interpretations of life and history "more profoundly." To achieve this, he suggested, a radical religion must set itself the task of working out how a Christian can come to terms with a materialistic interpretation of history and a Marxian economic and political strategy without falling for the utopian naturalism embedded in Marxism. Trotting out his usual criticisms of Liberalism and Marxism, Niebuhr emphasized that a socialist Christian agreed with neither liberal moralism nor with utopian naturalism. A socialist Christian was convinced that justice in modern society cannot be achieved without struggle. But on the other hand, the vision of a perfect classless society where equal justice prevails should be regarded by a true socialist Christian as purely utopian.

---

<sup>55</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Radical Religion", editorial, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Autumn 1935), P. 3.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

The impact of Marxism on Niebuhr, especially when it came to the concept of justice in his theology could not be more conspicuous in this brief editorial. By launching such a magazine, Niebuhr effectively put into practice what he had been proposing as regards how an adequate Christian political ethic can be fostered, that is, to borrow the valuable insights from Marxist political strategy and preserve the more invaluable Christian ethic. If the birth of *Radical Religion* could itself be seen as a result of Niebuhr's engagement with the Soviet Union and particularly, Russian communism, then the fact that Niebuhr wrote on this subject in almost every issue of this journal served as another testimony to the importance that he attached to this communist country, the living embodiment of communism. How important did Niebuhr view Russian communism? As late as 1936, reviewing Sidney and Beatrice Webb's book *Soviet Communism, A New Civilization*, Niebuhr remarked that the Russian experiment was "the most thrilling social venture in modern history."<sup>57</sup>

If the launch of *Radical Religion* could be seen as a concrete example of the kind of impact that Niebuhr's engagement with communism had on him, then other aspects of this impact were more subtle, yet far more profound. How Niebuhr developed the central category of his theology, namely, myth and meaning, serves as a case in point.

---

<sup>57</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, review of *Soviet Communism, A New Civilization*, by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring 1936), P. 38.

## Myth and Meaning

The importance of the category of “myth and meaning” in Niebuhr’s theology has been affirmed by many. Gordon Harland believed that “the relationship between meaning and mystery is crucial in all Niebuhr’s works.”<sup>58</sup> William Greenlaw argued that Niebuhr’s theological style “rested on his development of myth as the key term for understanding the nature of Christian truth.”<sup>59</sup> John Bennett, though critical of his friend on this score,<sup>60</sup> nevertheless testified that expressing his faith in relation to both mystery and meaning was Niebuhr’s life-long endeavor.<sup>61</sup> Douglas Macintosh, the systematic theologian of Yale, who opened the whole world of philosophical and theological learning to his famous student, attested that seeking truth in myths was Niebuhr’s “favorite theme”.<sup>62</sup>

Unfortunately, how Niebuhr came to employ myth or religious symbol as a key term in interpreting the Christian faith has been left largely unexamined by his admirers and critics alike.<sup>63</sup> Some have not properly understood Niebuhr’s use of religious symbols in the first place.<sup>64</sup> My thesis argues that the emergence of myth and meaning as a key

---

<sup>58</sup> Gordon Harland, “The Theological Foundations of Reinhold Niebuhr’s Social Thought”, in *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Centenary Appraisal* (Atlanta Georgia: Scholars Press, 1992), edited by Gary A. Gaudin and Douglas John Hall, P. 116.

<sup>59</sup> William A. Greenlaw, “The Nature of Christian Truth: Another look at Reinhold Niebuhr and Mythology”, *The Saint Luke’s Journal of Theology*, Vol. 19 (June, 1976). P. 195-196.

<sup>60</sup> See John C. Bennett, Review of *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (April, 1936), P. 214, also Review of *Beyond Tragedy*, *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (July, 1938), P. 336.

<sup>61</sup> John Bennett, Foreword, in William G. Chrystal, *Young Reinhold Niebuhr: His Early Writings, 1911-1931*, P. 15.

<sup>62</sup> Douglas Clyde Macintosh, “Is Theology Reducible to Mythology?” *The Review of Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (January 1940), P. 140.

<sup>63</sup> The term “myth” and “symbol” are often interchangeable in Niebuhr’s writings, as Daniel Rice suggested in *Reinhold Niebuhr and John Dewey*. See Daniel Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr and John Dewey: An American Odyssey* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), P. 165.

<sup>64</sup> Ronald Stone, *Faith and Politics*, XIV.

category in Niebuhr's theology came as another result of his struggle with the challenge of the communist religion. More specifically, it was the appeal and peril of the "Marxian mythology"<sup>65</sup> that prodded Niebuhr into developing a "Christian mythology" which centered on his oft-quoted notion that it is important to "take Biblical symbols seriously but not literally."<sup>66</sup> For Niebuhr's admirers, tracing the root of the central category of his theology to Marxism in this manner would be tantamount to heresy, or being disrespectful to say the least. On the other hand, in the eyes of his critics, Niebuhr's "theological mythologism" was perhaps itself a heresy, or at least bordered on "mythological factionalism" as his teacher charged him.<sup>67</sup> Therefore they did not need to link this mythologism with Marxism to discredit it. Hence only few people like Dennis McCann made the suggestion that Niebuhr's understanding of Marxism's character as religious myth played an important role in leading him to seek a more profound interpretation of the truth in Christian religious myth.<sup>68</sup>

The preceding chapter "The Religion of Communism" showed how the concept of "meaning" came to assume a prominent position in Niebuhr's interpretation of religion as his engagement with Russian communism deepened in the early 1930s. It is now necessary to examine the theme of myth, which was very closely related to "meaning" whenever this issue came up in his works. It is worth noting that Niebuhr tended to use

---

<sup>65</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Optimism, Pessimism and Religious Faith", in Robert McAfee Brown, ed., *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, P. 10.

<sup>66</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. 2, P. 59, P. 289.

<sup>67</sup> Douglas Clyde Macintosh, "Is Theology Reducible to Mythology?" P. 151.

<sup>68</sup> Dennis McCann, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Jacques Maritain on Marxism: A Comparison of Two Traditional Models of Practical Theology", P. 147.

the word “myth” rather loosely, and sometimes it was interchangeable with “symbol”, or “mystery”, or “mythology”.

Niebuhr evinced his penchant for “myth”, and consequently a dislike for biblical literalism very early in his career. “Religion is poetry,” the young pastor wrote in his journal in 1920, “the truth in the poetry is vivified by adequate poetic symbols....yet one must not forget that the truth is not only vivified but also corrupted by the poetic symbol, for it is only one step from a vivid symbol to the touch of magic.”<sup>69</sup> At this stage, Niebuhr’s usage of “poetic symbol” was in line with his rather sentimental interpretation of religion, namely, that he saw religion as primarily a reaction to life’s mysteries and as a sense of awe before the infinitudes of the universe. He had yet to figure out what lies beneath those “poetic symbols” and look beyond those religious feelings. As he confessed in his diary, he “did not even know what to make of the cross” in the early 1920s.<sup>70</sup> It was not until mid-1920s that he began to see the cross as “a symbol of ultimate reality” and rejected the conventional liberal interpretation that the cross simply “proved the necessity of paying a high price for our ideals.”<sup>71</sup> Overall, as the excerpts of his diary revealed, though young Niebuhr had yet to get to the heart of the meanings of religious symbols, he held firmly that “poetic and religious imagination has a way of arriving at truth by giving a clue to the total meaning of things without being in any sense an analytic description of detailed facts.”<sup>72</sup> In his usual polemic style, it was amid his criticisms against “most scientists”, “fundamentalists” and “wooden-headed

---

<sup>69</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, P. 30.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, P. 70.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, P. 114.

conservative” who “insist that every bit of religious symbolism and poetry must be accepted literally and metaphysically” that his own views on myth began to form.<sup>73</sup>

“Religion and Poetry”, the article that he wrote for the *Theological Magazine of the Evangelical Synod of North America* in 1930, reaffirmed his old belief that “religion is poetry” and when it came to the ultimate nature of reality, “poetic imagination is as necessary as scientific precision.”<sup>74</sup> “It is impossible to deal with the world of values without symbolizing them by symbols drawn from the concrete world,” Niebuhr wrote, “that is why poetry is necessary to religion and why religion is itself poetry.”<sup>75</sup> It is worth stressing that at this point religion, in his eyes, was still “a champion of personality,” which was able to reach ultimate reality through “its moral and poetic insight.”<sup>76</sup> Typical of liberal moralists, he believed that “we can realize the moral and personal character of the universe, can discover the nature of God through moral and spiritual rather than through intellectual insight.”<sup>77</sup> As to how to achieve all this, besides noting that religious symbols carried moral and poetic significance, he did not offer any example with regard to what those poetic symbols actually meant. In other words, up until the beginning of the 1930s, although Niebuhr had the intuition to perceive religion as poetry, he had yet to slough off liberalism’s sentimental and overly optimistic interpretation of religion and dig out the deeper meanings of religious symbols.

---

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, P. 95.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Religion and Poetry”, in William G. Chrystal, *Young Reinhold Niebuhr: His Early Writings, 1911-1931*, P. 224.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, P. 225.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

Just as “experience and life” played a significant role in changing his perspectives on what the cross symbolized in the 1920s, Niebuhr’s growing appreciation of Christian mythology in the 1930s was also primarily a result of his analysis of experience, not least his engagement with communism.<sup>78</sup> In this regard, his famous slogan in the 1930s, “Politically to the Left and Theologically to the Right” serves as an apt description of his experience. People often tend to neglect, however, that there was a direct link between his politically leftward swing and theologically rightward move. It was precisely his radical pursuit that gradually drove him rightward toward a more conservative theological stance. In the case of Christian mythology, Niebuhr did not, like some fundamentalists, simply accept the truths in myths as revelation. It was only after seeing the inadequacies and dangers in the “Marxian mythology” that Niebuhr began to formulate a systematic interpretation of myth and meaning as a way to counter the challenge of the communist religion. In a sense, therefore, John Bennett’s criticism was right on target when he remarked that Niebuhr seemed to accept the Christian myths as great truths “as a result of his analysis of experience and not as result of accepting the Christian revelation. He believes in the Christian revelation because it fits the facts.”<sup>79</sup> For Niebuhr, indeed, “facts” and “experience” mattered more than anything else when it came to the ultimate source of the most fundamental truths in Christianity.

While at the beginning of the 1930s Niebuhr still subscribed to the old liberal view of religion as “the champion of personality,” by mid-1930s, his views of religion had already shifted toward a definitive stand. That is, he now saw religion as “the act of faith

---

<sup>78</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, P. 70.

<sup>79</sup> John Bennett, Review of *Beyond Tragedy*, P. 336.

by which life is endowed with meaning or by which the meaning of life is apprehended.”<sup>80</sup> This evolving process was paralleled, and partly prompted, as previously mentioned, by his deepening understanding of the essence of the communist religion. When he first formally addressed the problem of this religion after his trip to the Soviet Union, he saw in communism primarily a combination of optimism and pessimism which provided a great incentive to social action. By mid-1930s, this “catastrophic” and “apocalyptic” religion had become for him, a “Marxian mythology” which, like other “vital religions”, “engages the entire human psyche and offers its interpretation of life and the world in order that it may challenge to action in conformity with its ‘truths’.”<sup>81</sup> This “mythology” certainly fit well into his definition of religion, namely, that the “Marxian mythology” endowed life with meaning for the proletariat who had been disinherited by the injustices of modern industrial civilization.<sup>82</sup>

*Reflections on the End of an Era* was the first major work in which Niebuhr discussed the issue of mythology in connection with the communist religion. Claiming that “Meaning can be attributed to history only by a mythology,” he declared that “Communism is a religion in as far as it has a mythology which insists that human life and history have meaning.”<sup>83</sup> Here Niebuhr seemed to suggest that every philosophy of life was in essence a mythology as long as it acknowledged the meaningfulness of existence. Since “it is impossible to establish a sense of meaning in history in scientific terms,”<sup>84</sup> he wrote,

---

<sup>80</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Problem of Communist Religion,” P. 378.

<sup>81</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Christian Politics and Communist Religion”, P. 461.

<sup>82</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Optimism, Pessimism and Religious Faith”, P. 10.

<sup>83</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era*, P. 193.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, P. 194.

only “mythical descriptions of reality” can give men “a sense of depth of life.”<sup>85</sup> It followed that every system of meaning contained a mythology in the sense that in it the meaning of human existence was presupposed. Later on, in his broadside against the religion of secularism, Niebuhr offered a clearer epistemological basis for this claim: “Every explanation of the meaning of human existence must avail itself of some principle of explanation which cannot be explained. Every estimate of values involves some criterion of value which cannot be arrived at empirically.”<sup>86</sup> Reminiscent of the Kantian metaphysical agnosticism as this might seem, it was but another expression of Niebuhr’s ingrained belief that religion is poetry which seeks to grasp the meaning of life mythically.

By this standard, both the Marxist view of history and the liberalistic belief of history as progress are mythology. Indeed Niebuhr made it clear that this was so in this book. But the latter view was “too easy a mark for Niebuhr to waste much ammunition upon,”<sup>87</sup> because he held that “long before the disintegration of modern optimism, the liberal culture in which it was embedded was challenged by a new mythology.”<sup>88</sup> This new mythology was nothing but the Marxian mythology. Therefore, what Niebuhr really had in mind when he discussed “Mythology and History” in this book was the challenge of this new mythology, not the discredited liberal one.

---

<sup>85</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Optimism, Pessimism and Religious Faith”, P. 7.

<sup>86</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Christian Church in a Secular Age”, in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, P. 79.

<sup>87</sup> King Gordon, “The Twilight of This Age”, Review of *Reflections on the End of an Era, World Tomorrow*, Vol. 17, No. 5 ( March 1, 1934). P. 116.

<sup>88</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Optimism, Pessimism and Religious Faith”, P. 10.

Niebuhr presented a more elaborate explanation as to why the Marxist view of history was essentially mythical in this book. Although contemporary history appeared to justify the allegedly scientific Marxist philosophy of history, he observed, “nevertheless its confident faith, that good will grow out of disaster, belongs definitely to the category of mythology rather than science.”<sup>89</sup> The Marxian idea of salvation through catastrophe, he added, expressed “a faith in the character of life and history which is religious rather than scientific because the mechanisms of history are subsumed under a purpose of history.”<sup>90</sup> This purpose of history embodied in Marxism, it seemed to Niebuhr, was just a disguised form of projection of human ideals upon cosmic reality. Moreover, the communist belief that equal justice would eventually prevail also had a religious and mythical note to it, in the sense that like all religion, this belief dealt with the problem of pessimism. To advocate that an ideal society will be born out of the ashes of the present social order was to say that history is on the proletariat’s side. A world view which “finds the mechanisms of the cosmos either neutrally amenable or profoundly sympathetic to human ideals” was “mythological and religious.”<sup>91</sup> Therefore the ultimately optimistic Marxist view of history was essentially a mythology.

For Niebuhr, the chief defect of this Marxian mythology was obvious: communism failed to “go to the length of finding conscious purpose in the universe,” and therefore in effect denied the existence of God.<sup>92</sup> In his view, “an adequate mythology never fails to commit the rational absurdity of conceiving God as at once the pinnacle and basis of

---

<sup>89</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era*, P. 195.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, P. 196.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

reality, the goal toward which life is striving and the force by which it strives.”<sup>93</sup> But what does an “adequate mythology” involve? It seems logical that Niebuhr should provide a convincing alternative to the “false” mythology of the liberalistic view of history and the Marxian mythology. Although he touched upon the myth of creation in this book, a full-fledged Christian mythology only appeared one year later in his book *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*.

*An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, as John Bennett commented, “comes nearer than any of Reinhold Niebuhr’s previous books to being a rounded interpretation of Christian faith.”<sup>94</sup> It is significant that Niebuhr chose to elaborate on his use of myth in the opening chapter “An Independent Christian Ethic.” To explain the function of religious myths obviously involves an explanation of the nature of religion first. Religion, Niebuhr stated, was concerned with “life and existence as a unity and coherence of meaning.”<sup>95</sup> High religions, like Christianity, were distinguished by “the extent of the unity and coherence of life which they seek to encompass and the sense of a transcendent source of meaning by which alone confidence in the meaningfulness of life and existence can be maintained.”<sup>96</sup> As can be seen, myth and meaning were inextricably linked in such an interpretation of religion.

With the nature of religion clearly defined, Niebuhr brought up the issue of myth again. In his view, “it is the genius of true myth to suggest the dimension of depth in reality and

---

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. P. 200.

<sup>94</sup> John Bennett, review of *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, P. 212.

<sup>95</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, P. 16.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, P. 17.

point to a realm of essence which transcends the surface of history.”<sup>97</sup> In other words, myth dealt with “vertical aspects of reality” which transcended the horizontal relationships of historical occurrences. Therefore, “myth alone was capable of picturing the world as a realm of coherence and meaning without defying the facts of incoherence.”<sup>98</sup> The relationship between myth and religion was thus spelt out. Myths, or mythical symbols, are pointers of the great religious truths. These myths are necessary, Niebuhr later would add, because “it is not possible for finite minds to comprehend that which transcends and fulfils history. The finite mind can only use symbols and pointers of the character of the eternal.”<sup>99</sup>

Exactly, in the case of biblical myths, what then are those “symbols”? And what do those “symbols” mean? Niebuhr’s answer to this sent some of his critics incandescent with rage. “The myth of the Creator God,” he wrote, “offers the possibilities for a prophetic religion in which the transcendent God becomes both the judge and the redeemer of the world.”<sup>100</sup> As to Christ, Niebuhr termed him as a “true mythical symbol of both the possibilities and the limits of the human.”<sup>101</sup> To describe creation as a myth was perhaps not very controversial. But the case of Christ was different. Was Christ a true historical figure, or just a “mythical symbol”? This is really a matter of life and death for Christianity. No wonder that even his younger brother H. Richard Niebuhr would take him to task on this issue. Siding with his teacher Macintosh on this, H. R. Niebuhr pointed out that his brother’s use of myth implied that “Jesus Christ as revelation of God

---

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. P. 22.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. P. 36.

<sup>99</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. 2, P. 289.

<sup>100</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, P. 39.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, P. 25.

might be a mythological figure standing for suffering love in history.”<sup>102</sup> This radical view, of course, was totally unacceptable to Christians who regarded the existence of Christ as “a once-and-for-all event.”<sup>103</sup> Niebuhr certainly needed to tread more carefully in this domain and work out a more rounded interpretation of the meanings of those religious symbols.

Extending his discussion of St. Paul’s confession “As deceivers and yet true” in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, Niebuhr continued to elaborate on his use of myth in his book *Beyond Tragedy* (1937). That Niebuhr was deeply attached to the use of myth at this stage was underscored by the title of the opening chapter. “As deceivers, yet true”, he made clear in the preface, dealt with a theme which ran through the rest of the book, namely, “the necessary and perennially valid contribution of myth to the biblical world view.”<sup>104</sup> What St. Paul meant, Niebuhr explained, was that what is true in Christianity can only be expressed in symbols which carry “a certain degree of provisional and superficial deception.”<sup>105</sup> As to what exactly these symbols meant, this time he gave a very detailed formulation in this work. Creation symbolizes the dependence of human existence upon the “ground of existence.”<sup>106</sup> The myth of fall is a symbol of “human evil”: “egoism is sin in its quintessential form.”<sup>107</sup> Christ expresses “both the infinite possibilities of love in human life and the infinite possibilities beyond human life.”<sup>108</sup>

---

<sup>102</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, “Reinhold Niebuhr’s Interpretation of History”, in H. Richard Niebuhr: *Theology, History, and Culture, Major Unpublished Writings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), edited by William Stacy Johnson, P. 99.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, x.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. P. 3.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, P. 9.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, P. 11.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, P. 17.

The death of Christ is “the revelation of ultimate reality which may become the principle of interpretation for all human experience.”<sup>109</sup> Lastly, the Second Coming of Christ expresses the Christian hope of the fulfilment of life “paradoxically and dialectically.”<sup>110</sup>

More importantly, building on the fundamental roles that he assigned to myth, Niebuhr fleshed out the relationship between myth and the Christian religion in this book. Every Christian myth, he asserted, expressed the dimension of eternity in time, or more specifically, “both the meaningfulness and the incompleteness of the temporal world, both the majesty of God and his relation to the world.”<sup>111</sup> Therefore, “the Christian religion may be characterized as one which has transmuted primitive religious and artistic myths and symbols without fully rationalizing them.”<sup>112</sup> According to this interpretation, Christianity seems to come down to a mythological system which seeks to grasp the meaningfulness of human existence poetically while revealing its incompleteness in relation to the idea of God. Just as the ultimately optimistic Marxian mythology furnished a center of meaning, or ground of existence for people living under the communist regime, Christian mythology bore a trust of the meaningfulness of life on the Christians’ part. But unlike atheistic Marxism, Christianity has a transcendent point of reference, under which all human achievements are judged, namely, God. The need to prove that Christian mythology is superior to Marxian mythology, and only such a mythology could do full justice to the tragedies and incongruities of life explains why

---

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, P. 20.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, P. 22.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. P. 7.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

Niebuhr was so determined to re-interpret the Christian “symbols” and attached to them such great importance.

But for the Christian traditionalists, Niebuhr’s effort in this regard seemed to run the risk of reducing theology to mythology. In fact, this was precisely Macintosh’s major concern when Niebuhr wrote “The Truth in Myths” in honor of his teacher in 1937. Reprinted several times, “The Truth in Myths” summarized Niebuhr’s previous views on this topic and presented his most definitive interpretation of myth and meaning.<sup>113</sup>

While previously in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* he made the distinction between “pre-scientific” myth and “supra-scientific” myth, in this article, Niebuhr designated them as “primitive myth” and “permanent myth” respectively. In his view, modern “protagonists of religion” erred in disavowing the permanent myth with primitive myth, which should be discarded in a scientific age. Niebuhr’s own effort, apparently, was to rescue the permanent myths in the Christian mythical heritage. Using the “myth of creation”, the “myth of the fall” and the cross as typical examples, he explained why Christianity was forced to tell “many little lies” (primitive myths) in the interest of a great truth, namely, “that life and history have meaning and that the source and the fulfilment of that meaning lie beyond history.”<sup>114</sup> It is obvious that this argument was developed along the lines of St. Paul’s “As deceivers, and yet true.” Overall, Niebuhr asserted that Christian orthodoxy was wrong in taking myths like “creation” and the “fall” as

---

<sup>113</sup> It first appeared in *The Nature of Religious Experience: Essays in Honor of D.D Macintosh*. Later on it was reprinted in three other books: *Philosophic Problems* (edited by Mandelbaum, Gramlich and Anderson); *Evolution and Religion* (edited by Gail Kennedy); *Faith and Politics* (edited by Ronald Stone).

<sup>114</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Truth in Myths”, in *Faith and Politics*, P. 26.

historically true. By insisting on the literal truth of such myths, Christian orthodoxy “makes a bad historical science out of true religious insights.”<sup>115</sup> In other words, the real significance of those myths lay on the “supra-scientific” rather than the “pre-scientific” level. These “supra-scientific” myths, as pointers of meaning, reflect “the dimension of depth in existence.”<sup>116</sup> Niebuhr summed up the significance of myth this way:

The transcendent source of the meaning of life is thus in such relation to all temporal process that a profound insight into any process or reality yields a glimpse of the reality which is beyond it. This reality can be revealed and expressed only in mythical terms. These mythical terms are the most adequate symbols of reality because the reality which we experience constantly suggests a center and source of reality, which not only transcends immediate experience, but also finally transcends the rational forms and categories by which we seek to apprehend and describe it.<sup>117</sup>

As mentioned, Niebuhr’s “demythologization” of Christian myths in his theology stirred up strong criticisms from Christian scholars. Scathing attacks from his former teacher Douglas Macintosh, were particularly reflective of how unorthodox Niebuhr’s views on this subject appeared to the traditionalists.<sup>118</sup> Referring to Niebuhr’s favorite Pauline text “As deceivers, yet true,” Macintosh protested that his student “must not be allowed to hide the defects of his theology and religious epistemology behind the august example of the great apostle.”<sup>119</sup> More significantly, Macintosh charged that his student’s treatment

---

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. P. 25.

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

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. P. 25.

<sup>118</sup> Following the publication of Niebuhr’s “The Truth in Myths,” an article written, quite ironically in retrospect, in honor of his teacher, the two engaged in a fascinating exchange of views on the topic of myth. In response to his student’s article, Macintosh strongly criticized the latter in “Is Theology Reducible to Mythology?” In this article, Macintosh went far as to state that “I failed to see how anyone who maintains that no religious concepts are literally true can, without confusion, be regarded as even a religious believer.” Later on, Niebuhr responded to his teacher’s criticism in “A Reply to Professor Macintosh,” justifying his use of myth while at the same time accusing his teacher of misunderstanding him. Niebuhr’s response was in turn followed by Macintosh’s “A Rejoinder to Professor Niebuhr’s Reply.” All these articles appeared in *The Review of Religion* in 1940.

<sup>119</sup> Douglas Macintosh, “Is Theology Reducible to Mythology?” P. 143.

of Christian myths bordered on “mythological factionalism” and stopped short of questioning whether Niebuhr was a real religious believer at all.<sup>120</sup> Macintosh’s deepest worry was that, if Niebuhr’s approach to Christian myths was adopted as the norm, it could well spell the end of Christianity itself. “If all our best religious ideas are to be dismissed as mere poetic representations of an inaccessible Something which we not only can never begin to know but can never even think about with real and literal truth”, Macintosh observed, “the result of finding this out must be fatal, not only for theology, but ultimately for the life of practical religion itself.”<sup>121</sup>

Niebuhr responded to his teacher’s rigorous criticism by retorting that Macintosh “was unable to distinguish between truth and literal truth.”<sup>122</sup> While Macintosh stuck to the literal truth of Christian myths and believed that theology sought to translate poetry into literal truth,<sup>123</sup> Niebuhr maintained that “in the field of religion, any statement which is literally true has no particular significance.”<sup>124</sup> It is obvious that for Macintosh, the connotation of the word “mythology” ran counter to the spirit of Christian faith, in the sense that all significant biblical events are supposed to be literally true and must be regarded as historical facts, not mythical or subject to different interpretations. The truths in these “myths” were truths of revelation. But for Niebuhr, the myths in Christianity were true because, ultimately, they were distilled from human experience and

---

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, P. 151, 152.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, P. 150.

<sup>122</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “A Reply to Professor Macintosh,” *The Review of Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (March, 1940), P. 304.

<sup>123</sup> Douglas Macintosh, “Is Theology Reducible to Mythology?” P. 153.

<sup>124</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “A Reply to Professor Macintosh”, P. 308.

corresponded to the vertical dimension of reality. “Great myths have actually been born out of profound experience and are constantly subject to verification by experience.”<sup>125</sup>

As John Bennett rightly pointed out, Niebuhr was “fundamentally an empiricist rather than a traditionalist who believed in the insights contained in the myths of theology because they do justice to more of the stubborn facts than any rationalistic scheme does.”<sup>126</sup> Indeed, Niebuhr was drawn to myth not because he had any fondness for religious orthodoxy. In his reply to Macintosh’s criticism, he made his dislike for orthodoxy and dogmatism clear: “nothing fills me with more dismay than the tendency of some theologians to flee from the superficialities of liberalism to the discredited dogmatism and obscurantism of orthodoxy. I have no interest in reviving orthodoxy.”<sup>127</sup> Niebuhr was attracted to myth because first of all, he had an intuition of perceiving religion as a kind of poetry which sought to grasp the meaning of existence in a mythic way. In this regard, his interpretation of myth was no different from that of some well-known philosophers like Karl Jaspers and Paul Ricoeur.<sup>128</sup> Secondly, Niebuhr’s effort

---

<sup>125</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Truths in Myths”, P. 30.

<sup>126</sup> John Bennett, Review of *Beyond Tragedy*, P. 336.

<sup>127</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “A Reply to Professor Macintosh”, P. 307.

<sup>128</sup> Karl Jaspers believed that mythical thinking “characterizes man in any epoch.” In his view, myth includes the following elements: first, myth is often a story told to express intuitive insights; second, myth deals with sacred stories and vision; lastly, myth is a “carrier of meanings which can be expressed only in the language of myth.” See, Karl Jaspers, “Myth and Religion,” in *Myth and Christianity*(1958), edited by Karl Jaspers and Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Ricoeur’s interpretation of meaning and mystery is also strikingly similar to Niebuhr’s view on this. While Niebuhr believed that myth provides a tangent point at which divinity touches upon humanity, thereby offering hopes to the perplexed, Paul Ricoeur held that meaning and mystery constitute the “language of hope.” Ricoeur once wrote, “Meaning: there is a unity of meaning; it is the basis of the courage to live in history. Mystery: but this meaning is hidden; no one can define it, rely on it, draw assurance from it against the perils of history; we must infer it from such visible indications as we find.” See, Paul Ricoeur, “Christianity and the Meaning of History: Progress, Ambiguity, Hope”, in *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 32, No. 4, October 1952, P. 250. Interestingly, Niebuhr also agreed with Nicolas Berdyaev on the validity of myth. He quoted Berdyaev’s following interpretation of myth approvingly in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*: “Myth is a reality immeasurably greater than concept. It is high time that we stopped identifying myth with invention with the illusions of primitive mentality...Behind the myths are concealed the greatest realities, the original phenomena of the spiritual

to construct a vital Christian mythology was to a great extent prompted by his engagement with another mythology – Marxian mythology. By politically moving to the left, not because of his attachment to the orthodoxy, Niebuhr eventually came to a theologically conservative position.

In sum, by the end of the 1930s, the category of myth and meaning had taken a very solid and prominent position in Niebuhr's theology. If Niebuhr's main effort in the latter part of this decade was to devise a viable Christian political ethic, then it is obvious as to what kind of role that his engagement with the "Marxian mythology" played in this process. Openly advocating that a Christian political ethic should "borrow from, and affirm, the validity of many of the basis tenets of Marxian politics," Niebuhr eventually developed an independent Christian ethic with "myth and meaning" as its key category.<sup>129</sup> This category was to become a recurring theme in his better known works like *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, and *Faith and History*.

### **The "Rediscovery" of Sin**

Niebuhr has been commonly associated with the "rediscovery" of sin ever since *Time* magazine published a book review entitled "Sin Rediscovered" in 1941, when Niebuhr's best-known work *The Nature and Destiny of Man* came out. As a fundamental concept

---

life...Myth is always concrete and expresses life better than abstract thought can do...Myth presents to us the supernatural in the natural - it brings two worlds together symbolically." See Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, P. 24. One can easily recognize the similarities between the two's approaches to myth.  
<sup>129</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Christian Politics and Communist Religion." P. 471.

in Christian theology, “sin” has always been there. Then why was Niebuhr given such credit?

The reason, as this book review aptly summarized, is because “America's most influential theologian was reversing the optimistic and rationalistic trend of Christian liberalism to lead his legions back to an almost medieval emphasis on the basic sinfulness of man.”<sup>130</sup> Indeed, it was Niebuhr, more than anyone else who granted (again) the concept of sin such a prominent position in Christian thoughts at a time when liberal idealism was still lingering on. Furthermore, it was Niebuhr who related his “realistic” analysis of human nature to contemporary problems and called on Christians to take social responsibilities despite the fact that human enterprise will always be tinted by sin. The reinterpretation of sin – the concept of sin as pride or human self-centeredness – is where the real significance of Niebuhr’s rediscovery of sin lies.

How did Niebuhr make this rediscovery? This is undoubtedly a very complicated question. In terms of theological roots, Niebuhr was heavily influenced by St. Augustine on this point. But given Niebuhr’s confession that the unfolding of his theological ideas was not mainly a result of study, this section tries to answer this question by looking at his engagement with Marxism.

In fact, Niebuhr himself was very frank and specific in acknowledging his indebtedness to Marxism with regard to the problem of sin. In the inaugural issue of *Radical Religion*, he declared that Marxism provided a valuable insight “which lies at the heart of prophetic

---

<sup>130</sup> “Sin Rediscovered”, *Time Magazine* (Monday, March 24, 1941).

religion and which Marxism has rediscovered: the insight that man's cultural, moral and religious achievements are never absolute, that they are colored and conditioned by human finiteness and corrupted by sin."<sup>131</sup> Any Marxist would understandably bristle at the idea that the notion of "sin" was one of Marxism's contributions to a "prophet religion." But in fact, the concept of sin is nothing but the idea of human self-centeredness or pride couched in religious language. As William Frankena observed, what Niebuhr had said about man and his social problems from a distinctively theistic or super-naturalist position, can also be said by a naturalist or from a natural law or a self-realizationist position.<sup>132</sup> While Marx saw the bourgeois ideology as a rationalization of the unjust social order, Niebuhr attacked the capitalist society as immoral because society, or any group for that matter, driven by egoism, always acts in its self-interest. For Niebuhr, human "self-interestedness", or "self-centeredness", or "pride", were synonymous with "sin". "It is this monstrous pretension of his (man's) egoism, the root of all imperialism and human cruelty, which is the very essence of sin."<sup>133</sup> It is clear, therefore, from the theological point of view, that Niebuhr's engagement with Marxism indeed played a significant role in his "rediscovery" of sin.

However, it needs to be stressed that Niebuhr did not simply endorse the Marxist "rediscovery" about the fact that human achievements tend to be corrupted by sin. For Niebuhr, it was profoundly ironical that a dogma which had made this "rediscovery" nevertheless professed complete "disinterestedness" in its judgment. In fact, the "sinful"

---

<sup>131</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, Editorial, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1935, P. 3.

<sup>132</sup> See Charles W. Kegley, *Politics, Religion and Modern Man: Essays on Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1969), P. 30.

<sup>133</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Truth in Myths," P. 25.

element in Marxism itself, namely, Marxism's tendency to pride itself on being transcendent in its indictment of the injustices and evils of capitalist society, more than anything else, eventually pushed Niebuhr towards a theologically conservative stance which was characterized by an elaboration of the dogma of sin.

Even in his first Marxist work, Niebuhr obviously harbored uneasiness about the "sinful" element in Marxist dogma. For him, the exaltation of the proletarian class as a special and disinterested class in Marxism smacked of human pride. This unqualified exaltation of the disinherited class, he noted, "is charged with both egotism and vindictiveness."<sup>134</sup> The proletarian class's tendency to brand itself as the most significant class for the future, in Niebuhr's view, ran the risks of "a deification of the class, reaching absurd mystical proportions."<sup>135</sup> But being a radical at that point, Niebuhr nevertheless swallowed those doubts by justifying the elevation of the proletarian class both subjectively and objectively.<sup>136</sup> In another Marxist work of the same period, *Reflections on the End of an Era*, he adopted a similar stance on this issue. While conceding that the proletarian class "has the right to claim that its ideals transcend its interests," he also observed that some of their viewpoints were "nevertheless partial to the time and place from which they sprang."<sup>137</sup> In other words, the proletarian class's views were equally conditioned, though these conditioned views may be somehow justified on the grounds that the

---

<sup>134</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, P. 156.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, P. 157.

<sup>136</sup> He wrote, "a deification of the class" is "on the subjective side an understandable reaction to present social inferiority, and, objectively considered, it may be justified by the strategic importance of the proletarian class in the task of rebuilding society. Who is better able to understand the true character of a civilization than those who suffer most from its limitations? Who is better able to state the social ideal in unqualified terms than those who have experienced the bankruptcy of old social realities in their own lives? Who will have more creative vigor in destroying the old and building the new than those in whose lives hunger, vengeance and holy dreams have compounded a tempestuous passion?" P. 157.

<sup>137</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era*, P. 171.

proletariat was a disinherited class that sought to abolish all special privileges in society. It is important to emphasize that, tolerant as he might seem of the proletariat's exaltation of its own status, in this book, Niebuhr also castigated the brutality and vindictiveness of the Russian communists. He would soon establish a clear connection between the proletarian class's claim that its ideals were transcendent and the horrendous liquidation of kulaks in the Soviet Union, and hence he gradually became more sober on this issue.

Niebuhr's uneasiness towards the "sinful" element in Marxism was also reflected in his article "Christian Politics and Communist Religion". But the rise of Fascism in Germany and the Russian communists' excessive use of force in liquidating its "class enemy" tilted him towards a much more apprehensive mood on this issue. In this article, he observed that the orthodox Marxian was tempted into a grave error by "his faulty religion with its mistaken analysis of the problem of human sin."<sup>138</sup> "One of the pathetic aspects of Marxian religion," he wrote, was that "its interpretation of history allows it to see the relativity and imperfection of the cultural values and pretensions of all other classes and groups; but the characteristic social attitudes and political objectives of the proletarian are made absolute."<sup>139</sup> Though the Marxian religion rediscovered the tendency to sin in other classes and groups, it not only failed to acknowledge the same tendency of its own, but sinned further by claiming its own attitudes and objectives as transcendent and absolute. Marxism's sanctification of the peculiar insights and needs of a particular class and group, Niebuhr worried, had serious consequences in reality: that is, it tended to lead to fanaticism and brutality.

---

<sup>138</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Christian Politics and Communist Religion", P. 465.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

Niebuhr's first systematic discussion of the problem of sin appeared in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*. Given his long-standing reservations about the "sinful" elements in Marxism, the elaboration of the problem of sin in a whole chapter of this book certainly seemed to be appropriate and logical. That Niebuhr's approach to the notion of sin bore heavy influence from Marxism was also illustrated by his strong criticisms of Marxism in this regard throughout this book.

But most significantly, heralding his statement in the inaugural issue of *Radical Religion*, Niebuhr also made it abundantly clear that Marxism deserved credit for its rediscovery of some "insights into human nature," which "belong to the forgotten insights of prophetic religion."<sup>140</sup> What were these insights? All human history, he remarked, revealed to what degree "human finiteness and sin enter into all human actions and attitudes."<sup>141</sup> This "human finiteness and sin", detectable in all moral aspirations and cultural achievements of mankind, in Niebuhr's words, was "a quality of man's spirituality which liberal culture had overlooked and which even historic religion had forgotten."<sup>142</sup> It was Marxism, or more specifically, the Marxian theory of economic determinism, that made the very valuable rediscovery of this quality. According to Marxism, all moral and religious ideals, legal codes and cultural attainments were developed under certain historical and social circumstances and therefore bore the imprint of these circumstances. The allegedly objective and disinterested ideas of all social groups always proceeded from conditioned perspectives. These objectives and ideas, he declared (obviously from

---

<sup>140</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, P. 134.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid*, P. 133.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid*.

a supposed Marxian point of view), were “always subject to the corruption of man’s spiritual pretension, to human sin, in short.”<sup>143</sup> These insights into human nature “which Marxism has fortunately added to modern culture,” he concluded, “must be re-appropriated with gratitude for their rediscovery.”<sup>144</sup> Arguably, Niebuhr himself was the most well-known theologian who actually re-appropriated these insights.

Niebuhr’s re-appropriation of these insights, as this thesis has argued all along, was based on his attacks on Marxism’s own pretensions of being absolute, disinterested and transcendent in its judgments. Following his praise of Marxism for those valuable insights in this context, Niebuhr immediately added that “the pathos of Marxian spirituality is that it sees the qualified and determined character of all types of spirituality except its own.”<sup>145</sup> By this time, the serious ramifications of this pathos had already dawned on him. Citing the cruelty of Russian communists toward their “class enemies”, he pointed out that this brutality was deeply rooted in communists’ pretentious identification of every form of human egoism with the capitalist spirit. Russian communists’ ruthlessness in liquidating “unjust” elements in their society also proved that “the social problem is complicated rather than solved when finite men make a final effort to transcend their finiteness and set themselves up as unqualified arbiters over the issues of life.”<sup>146</sup> Since Marxism was prone to identify the attitudes and values of the workers with the absolute truth, as events in Russia had vividly corroborated, Niebuhr concluded that “It is therefore deficient in an ultimate perspective upon historic and

---

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid, P. 134.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, P. 145.

relative moral achievements.”<sup>147</sup> That was exactly why in this book Niebuhr earnestly called for an independent Christian ethic that can provide “an ultimate perspective” and subject the corruption of all human enterprises to judgment.

As mentioned, Niebuhr’s call for an independent Christian ethic was well reflected in his advocacy of a “prophetic religion”. At the heart of this prophetic religion, as he declared in the inaugural issue of *Radical Religion* in 1935, lay Marxism’s rediscovery that man’s achievements were perennially colored and conditioned by human finiteness and corrupted by sin. Nowhere else did Niebuhr ascribe such great importance to these Marxist insights so clearly. However, with equal clarity, he also pinned down Marxism’s deficiencies in this regard and criticized its utopianism. “What the Marxian calls economic determinism,” he wrote, a socialist Christian saw “as a part of the general problem of human finitude and sin.”<sup>148</sup> Moreover, a Christian socialist knew that “all men see the problems in which they are involved from a particular perspective and rationalize their particular interests dishonestly.”<sup>149</sup> Marxism not only erred in hiding its own dishonesty behind its pretensions, worse, it was essentially utopian in the sense that as a philosophical dogma, it expected that human self-centeredness will vanish with the destruction of capitalism. The danger of this utopianism was soon to be vividly borne out by the show trials and purges in the Soviet Union. It further reinforced Niebuhr’s conviction of the “sinfulness” of all human enterprises.

---

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, P. 28.

<sup>148</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Radical Religion”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 1, No.1 ( Autumn 1935), P. 4.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

Niebuhr's last book before the Second World War, *Beyond Tragedy*, also illustrated how his approach to sin was influenced by Marxism. Using the myth of the "Tower of Babel" as a symbol of human pride, he wrote that the virtue of Marxism was that "it brings the Tower of Babel character of all civilizations into the open and makes men conscious of it."<sup>150</sup> Put specifically, this "industrial worker's most characteristic philosophy," he explained, "clearly discerns the economic basis of all culture and points a finger of scorn at the claims of impartiality made by the cultural enterprises of the ages."<sup>151</sup> Marxism was certainly right in seeing ideologies as instruments of a social struggle and as rationalizations of interest. However, he added, "the remarkable characteristic of this philosophy is that, having recognized the finite perspectives of all cultures and the sinful effort to hide and deny this finiteness, it proceeds to construct another Tower of Babel."<sup>152</sup> By claiming that human finiteness would be overcome by establishing a classless society, Marxism gave itself the pretentious and illusory hope that a classless society can achieve universal and impartial truth. Citing from the tenth anniversary number of the bulletin of the League of Fighting Godless in Russia,<sup>153</sup> Niebuhr concluded that "it (Marxism) thus offers a final expression of the perennial pathos of human spirituality; its ability to detect the spurious claims of impartiality and universality in every culture except one's own."<sup>154</sup>

---

<sup>150</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, P. 36.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Niebuhr quoted from the same bulletin in "God and Piece Work" in *Radical Religion* to make his point that the genuine creative elements in communism are curiously compounded with its utopian hopes, See, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring 1936), P. 5.

<sup>154</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, P. 37.

Arguably, *Man's Nature*, the first Gifford Lecture that Niebuhr delivered on the brink of the Second World War offered his most definitive interpretation of sin. In this magisterial work, though critical of Marxism more than ever, Niebuhr pointed out that Marxism had significant bearings on the problem of sin in Christian theology (or rather, in the theology he was espousing). He also gave Marx full credit for recognizing “the profound paradox of human spirituality and morality,” namely, that “the interests of the self cannot be followed if the self cannot obscure these interests behind a facade of general interest and universal values.”<sup>155</sup> This paradox, Niebuhr claimed, was regarded in Christian theology as the “element of inevitable dishonesty in original sin.”<sup>156</sup> Reframing his previous term “rediscover”, he observed that Marxism “tentatively discovered” but finally “dissipated a valuable insight into human nature.” Marxism dissipated this valuable insight because

“it failed to recognize that there was an ideological element in all human rational processes which revealed itself not only in the spirituality of the dominant bourgeois class, and not only in the rationalization of economic interest; but which expressed itself in all classes and used every circumstance, geographic, economic and political, as an occasion for man’s assertion of universal significance for his particular values.”<sup>157</sup>

Niebuhr made no secret of the fact that his discussion of sin was based on a valuable insight that Marxism rediscovered but eventually dissipated. Though the connotation of “original sin”, as Niebuhr himself acknowledged, was “offensive to the modern mind,” its essence, “the sin of pride”, is indeed ultimately a dressed-up Marxist dogma.<sup>158</sup>

---

<sup>155</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. 1, P. 35.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, Preface.

Unfortunately, the importance that Niebuhr himself attributed to Marxism in this regard has been lost on some of Niebuhr's followers and critics alike.

### **Political Sin Revealed – the Moscow Trials**

So far, this study has established that Niebuhr's engagement with Marxism (often against the backdrop of unfolding events in the Soviet Union) played a significant role in prompting him to rediscover sin. Starting from the mid-1930s, the purges and trials in the Soviet Union, under Stalin's previous savage policies, received more extensive coverage in America and created a much deeper impact, especially among the radicals. These ruthless purges and trials undoubtedly aggravated Niebuhr's long-standing doubts about the dangers or sinful elements embedded in communism. As a result, his disenchantment with radicalism deepened steadily. As the specter of war loomed large in Europe, an increasingly apprehensive Niebuhr even felt that "the turn of events in Russia is more disheartening than the slow suicide of Europe."<sup>159</sup> If Niebuhr remained uncertain about the fairness of the purges and trials throughout this period, then the Nazi-Soviet Pact finally forced him to cast away those lingering doubts about Marxism and began to develop his theory of original sin in a more systematic manner. It was by no means a coincidence that Niebuhr chose to use the notion of sin as a guiding thread in his Gifford Lecture when Europe was verging on "suicide" and the last glimmer of hope (offered by the Russian experiment) was smothered.

---

<sup>159</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Russia and Japan", *Radical Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 3 ( Summer 1938), P. 3.

Beginning with the assassination of Sergei Kirov, the popular Communist leader in Leningrad in 1934, mounting evidence suggested that Stalin was intent upon eliminating all possible political rivals on the startling charge that they were plotting against him and the state.<sup>160</sup> The tactics that Stalin employed took the form of highly-publicized trials in which the verdicts were secretly predetermined using extorted confessions. The first show trial, as the trials came to be known, a trial of the so-called "Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Centre", came in August 1936. In this trial, Lev Kamenev, Grigori Zinoviev and other prominent figures of the Bolshevik Revolution were put on trial for "treason", confessed their "crime" and then were executed. In January 1937, seventeen leading Communist figures such as Karl Radek, Yuri Piatakov and Grigory Sokolnikov met the same fate, with thirteen of them being shot and the remainder of them dying soon after in labor camps. The third trial, in March 1938, involved twenty-one defendants accused of belonging to the so-called "Bloc of Rightists and Trotskyites," led by Nikolai Bukharin, former head of the Communist International, and other leading figures such as former Prime Minister Alexei Rykov. All leading defendants were executed. At the time, most western observers who attended these trials attested that the trials were fair. Some fellow-travelers, out of their unconditional loyalty to the communist cause, subscribed to this view. More people were doubtful or even believed that they were merely frame-ups. The real truth about these trials and purges, however, were not known to the outside world until the release of Nikita Khrushchev's speech to the Twentieth Congress of the Russian Communist Party in 1956.

---

<sup>160</sup> Peter G. Boyle, *American-Soviet Relations: From the Russian Revolution to the Fall of Communism* (London: Routledge, 1993). P. 33.

When news about the Moscow Trials emerged, the bizarre confessions of so many high-ranking Communist figures about their grave “crimes” against Stalin and the Soviet regime, not to say the instant executions, simply left those who had more or less sympathized with the Russian experiment completely flummoxed and shocked. Reinhold Niebuhr’s initial attitude towards these show trials was typical of those who by then still harbored hopes about the Russian enterprise: astounded, skeptical about the fairness of those trials, yet at the same time still willing to give the Soviet regime the benefit of the doubt. The opening paragraph of one editorial of *Radical Religion*, written by Niebuhr in response to the Moscow Trials, was amply indicative of his mixed feelings:

Whatever interpretation one may place upon the Moscow trials they are a sorry business. If Radek, Piatakov, Sokolnikov and the rest of the defendants who once more astounded the world by their abject confessions of guilt are really guilty, it means that the Soviet system is less secure than we had imagined. A political regime which nourishes traitors for years in positions of highest responsibility lacks inner stability. If on the other hand these men are innocent and Stalin tortured these astounding confessions out of the defendants for reasons of his own, we have an even sorrier picture of the Russian regime.<sup>161</sup>

Apparently, Niebuhr was taken by surprise and put in a bind by the trials. For all his criticisms against the Soviet regime all along, by the time the trials took place, Niebuhr was still somewhat sanguine about “the most thrilling social adventure in modern history”: “On the whole what happens there (namely, the Soviet Union) is full of promise to mankind.”<sup>162</sup> He even appeared to have taken some of the verdicts of those trials at face value: “For all we know there may have been real terroristic plots against the

---

<sup>161</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Moscow Trials”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 2, No. 2 ( Spring 1937), P. 1.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.* P. 2.

government; and those who confessed their guilt may have been involved in them.”<sup>163</sup> However, to Niebuhr, as with many, the sheer severity of those “crimes” committed by so many high-powered communist officials was simply mind-boggling. Therefore, while evincing residual faith in the Soviet regime, he did not join the ranks of those who came to Stalin’s defense by citing that the trials carried conviction among foreign newspaper correspondents.<sup>164</sup> Rather, he stated frankly that “we do not profess to know the truth about the latest Russian trial,”<sup>165</sup> and whatever the real nature of the trials, those incredible “crimes” shed light on some deeper problems with the Russian regime. Moreover, the wrangle that had broken out in America following the trials between followers and sympathizers of Trotsky and members and sympathizers of the communist party filled him with dismay. Leveling against the latter’s uncritical support of Stalin, he remarked that even if one believed in the great Russian experiment in general terms, it was wrong to “suppress all critical faculties and accept the official version of a less than convincing trial.”<sup>166</sup> As a Christian socialist who did not belong to either of the two camps, for now, Niebuhr could only swallow his doubts and took comfort in the “religious certainties which absolve us of the necessity of finding our religious security in the shifting forces of politics.”<sup>167</sup>

---

<sup>163</sup> Ibid, P. 1. Niebuhr kept this ambivalent attitude towards the fairness of the Trials until the Stalin-Hitler Pact stunned the world over. In “The Russian Mystery”, commenting on the recent purge of the Russian army, he speculated that “it seems fairly certain that the Russian army defied or circumvented the diplomacy of the Kremlin. See “The Russian Mystery”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Autumn 1937).P. 5. Reviewing *Traitors on Trial*, a verbatim report of the Moscow Trials, he observed that “We are certain that most of the accused must have been guilty of disloyalty toward Stalin’s regime. They undoubtedly plotted against it.” See Book review, *Traitors on Trial: Verbatim Report of the Moscow Trials*, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 3 ( Summer 1938).. All these remarks, it needs to be stressed, were made before the truth of the Moscow Trials came out. They did not in any way suggest that Niebuhr belonged to the camp of the followers or sympathizers of the communist party who made similar remarks during this period.

<sup>164</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Moscow Trials”, P. 1.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

However, as heated debates about the trials rumbled on, even such religious certainties were not so easy to maintain, as Niebuhr soon discovered. In times of raging political storms, doesn't retreating to some kind of transcendent certainties amount to shirking responsibilities? Aren't criticisms made of the Moscow Trials by those who seek refuge in religious certainties prompted by Christian perfectionism? When pungent questions like these arose from his own camp, namely, the radical Christians, Niebuhr felt obliged to provide an answer and spell out the stand of a Christian socialist on the trials, even without much knowledge of the truth of them.

In the summer of 1937, penning another editorial on the Moscow Trials, "with some temper," Niebuhr took issue with "The Christian Left", a well-known journal of radical Christians in Britain over the issue of "Christian Perfectionism." In a leading article entitled "Perfectionists and the Moscow Trials," this English journal charged that any criticism of the Moscow trials from Christians was derived from "perfectionism" which had led the Christians to acquiesce in injustice time after time.<sup>168</sup> Contrary to the stand of those "perfectionists", the journal's own stance was allegedly "realistic", namely, it supported a necessarily "sinful" policy through which justice might be achieved. In the case of the Moscow Trials, this meant accepting the official version of the trials and "rejoicing with the Russian people in their deliverance from deadly peril."<sup>169</sup>

---

<sup>168</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Christian Perfectionism", *Radical Religion*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Summer 1937), P. 1.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

Long an advocate of the use of power in politics, Niebuhr certainly had no problems with the English journal's criticism of Christian perfectionism. He quoted with approval the journal's realistic view on state and society: "To try to stay in an imperfect world while struggling to overthrow it by instruments of perfection is mere self-delusion. State and society are imperfect by nature."<sup>170</sup> In the sense that politics involved power and would never be able to escape the use of power, Niebuhr concurred, "we must strike at the perfectionist fallacy."<sup>171</sup> However, by claiming that every word of the Soviet charged against Trotsky was true, he observed that the "realism" of "the Christian Left" went to another extreme and ran the danger of committing a "realist fallacy", namely, the belief that power was good as long as it was wielded for good purposes.<sup>172</sup> To embrace the official version of the Moscow trials too uncritically, in other words, amounts to giving a "moral carte blanche" to the overlord of the Soviet regime. Power was a perennial source of corruption which was bound to grow once freed of social checks. Drawing an analogy between the current situation in the Soviet Union with the inquisition of the medieval church, Niebuhr suggested that there was a possibility that "the oligarchs in Russia" were driven by spiritual rather than political necessity to eliminate their critics. Such was the dire outcome of the unchecked use of power in politics. Therefore, while rejecting perfectionism, a Christian socialist must also bear in mind that "no intelligent society can therefore afford to relax its restraints upon its centers of power nor its critical attitude toward the motives of the powerful."<sup>173</sup> As can be seen, though Niebuhr's editorial addressed the problem of Christian perfectionism, what really concerned him at

---

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid, P. 2.

<sup>172</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Christian Perfectionism", P. 2.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

this point was its opposite, that is, a “realism” which gave the use of power a free rein in seeking or maintaining justice.

With the publication of his first major work *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr had long been known as a Christian realist who tirelessly exposed the self-interestedness of the “immoral” society and openly advocated the use of power in achieving justice. Indeed, a recognition of the universality of self-interest and the necessity of the use of force in politics was the hallmark of the kind of Christian political ethic (or Christian realism, as it came to be called) that Niebuhr had been developing for much of the 1930s. For Niebuhr, before the Moscow Trials, the ultimate purpose of a realistic Christian ethic was to build a just and equal society, using force to overthrow the ruling class if necessary. The potential danger of the abuse of power by the new ruling class had yet to gain his full attention, albeit the brutality of the Russian communists in their use of force to liquidate “class enemies” certainly did not escape his scathing criticism.

The Moscow Trials, taking place at a time when the problem of sin became the underpinning theme in all his major writings, more than anything else, forced Niebuhr to get to grips with a chief political sin, that is, the perennial corruption of power. Before the Moscow trials, he could have heartily agreed with “the Christian Left” in their support of a “sinful” policy or the use of force to achieve justice whenever necessary. The trials, though the true nature of which remained unknown to the outside world until 1956, prompted Niebuhr to scrutinize the potential dangers of the abuse of power by the formerly disinherited and exploited through the prism of sin. This in turn, added a new

defining element to the kind of Christian realism that Niebuhr was striving for. “Power is, and will continue to be, dangerous, even in a socialist society.”<sup>174</sup> The necessity of resorting to force in politics as the distinguishing characteristic of Christian realism was now balanced by the emphasis that power was always a source of corruption. To believe that power will always be good so long as it is used for a good purpose was to commit a “realist fallacy”, a trap that a true Christian realist should be wary of.

In *Beyond Tragedy*, against the backdrop of the Moscow Trials, Niebuhr provided an in-depth analysis of this problem in connection with his broadsides against the tendency to sin in the proletarian class’s struggle for justice. The humanistic optimism of Marxism, he observed in the chapter “The Ultimate Trust”, can be expressed in one phrase: “Trust the poor man.”<sup>175</sup> But this trust in the poor man cannot be absolute. The reason was that, he explained (obviously with the Russian experiment in mind), once the poor man obtained the power to overthrow the old society and build a new social order, he would then cease to be the poor man and become the powerful man. This meant that even if the new social order was significantly better than the old one, it would not be free of the “temptation to corrupt and to misuse power.”<sup>176</sup> That Niebuhr had the ongoing events in the Soviet Union in mind when he talked about the “temptation to corrupt and to misuse power” was made abundantly clear by his further remarks on this issue. “Perhaps in this paradise of the poor man’s dreams,” he wrote, “the one prophet who has gained all the

---

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, P. 128.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

power will kill his fellow prophets.”<sup>177</sup> It should be easy to identify who this “prophet” Niebuhr referred to was. But as if this was not clear enough, he added that

“Stalin will condemn Kamenev and Zivoviev to death and Trotzky to exile. Only a person who allows unconscious utopian illusions to be transmuted into conscious lies will be able to view such contemporary facts without admitting that a too unqualified trust in the poor man as the redeemer will be the very force by which the poor man becomes untrustworthy.”<sup>178</sup>

In another chapter of this book, “Things That Are, Things That Are Not”, using the Moscow Trials as an example, Niebuhr further stressed the point about the untrustworthiness of the poor, the disinherited and the weak. “The disinherited are human,” he remarked, “and therefore subject to basic human sins.”<sup>179</sup> Underneath the proletarian class’s strong sense of destiny there lay “a baser mentality of wounded ego and compensatory pride and vindictiveness.”<sup>180</sup> The weak, in a sense, could commit even greater sin. The reason was that the weak not only sinned when they became powerful, but they also sinned “in prospect and imagination while they are weak.”<sup>181</sup> For Niebuhr, this was not just a theoretical analysis, but a “fact”. “The communist denial of this fact,” he observed, “is being tragically refuted in contemporary Russian history in which the weak who have become mighty, are committing all the sins of the mighty of other generations. Siberian exile in 1905 does not guarantee social or moral disinterestedness in the oligarch of today.”<sup>182</sup>

---

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid, P. 219.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid, P. 219-220.

“Politics is always a contest of power.”<sup>183</sup> Under the shadow of the Moscow Trials, Niebuhr saw this more clearly than ever before. To think that a classless society will eliminate the contest of power once and for all was a dangerous illusion. The Moscow Trials had demonstrated how quickly the “cruel facts of history” refuted utopian dreams like this.<sup>184</sup> The Marxian was certainly right in looking forward to a higher justice, which meant a higher “equilibrium of power”. But he would be dead wrong if he imagined that “this new equilibrium of power will so change human nature as to do away with the necessity of power and thus usher in an anarchistic millennium.”<sup>185</sup> The corruption of power as a form of sin was inherent in human nature. It would not wither away even when a more just society was established. The cruelty showed toward their foes by the ruling class, as evinced vividly in the Moscow Trials, exposed the obstinacy of sin in human nature before the world. In a word, Niebuhr drew his conclusion: “The Moscow trials have made an effectual end of Marxian universalism.”<sup>186</sup>

Though as mentioned, Niebuhr appeared to be uncertain about the real nature of the Moscow Trials, his worries about the corruption of power and doubts about the healthiness of Russian politics overshadowed all his short writings on this issue during this period.<sup>187</sup> Reviewing Leon Trotsky’s *The Russian Revolution Betrayed* in the

---

<sup>183</sup> Ibid. P. 180.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid. P. 179.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid. P. 192.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid, P. 244.

<sup>187</sup> Niebuhr’s increasingly negative views of the Soviet regime were undoubtedly reinforced by his reading of books on Russia that came out during the Moscow Trials period. This was reflected in the book reviews he churned out during this period. Such books include *Proletarian Journey* (by Fred E. Beal), *Assignment in Utopia* (by Eugene Lyons), *Russia Twenty Year After* (by Victor Serge), see “Disillusionment”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Winter 1937), P. 44-45. *My Life As A Rebel* (by Angelica Balabanoff), *Radical Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Fall 1938), P. 38. *The People’s Front* (by Earl Browder), *Radical Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Spring 1938), P. 47. Other book reviews will be mentioned in the following.

summer of 1937,<sup>188</sup> he agreed with the author's observations that "the dictatorship of the party has become a clique of office holders....Every form of inequality is growing in Russia and the tyranny of the ruling group is required to protect these privileges from the opposition of the masses."<sup>189</sup> In the aftermath of the purges of the Russian army in 1937, he drew the conclusion that "tyranny breeds conspiracy."<sup>190</sup> In the Spring of 1938, observing the dire international situation, he remarked that "we fully appreciate the solid achievements of the Russian economy but we have strong doubts about the wholesomeness of politics in Russia."<sup>191</sup> Later in the same year, citing at great length the alleged "confessions" in the latest Moscow Trial, a baffled Niebuhr wrote: "we do not know what they mean. We only know that they prove that Russia is not a healthy country..."<sup>192</sup>

In the aftermath of the third Moscow Trial in 1938, Niebuhr's worries about the abuse of power by the new ruling oligarchs in a supposedly just society came to a head. With the situation in Europe worsening and the Sino-Japanese War raging, the prospect of radicalism for a Christian socialist seemed bleaker than ever. Niebuhr's gloomy mood and disenchantment with the Russian experiment were well reflected in one editorial of

---

<sup>188</sup> Niebuhr's earlier belief that Trotsky was innocent of the charges of cooperating with fascist powers (as shown in 'Christian Perfectionism') largely derived from his reading of Trotsky's *The Russian Revolution Betrayed*, a "revelation of Trotsky's soul", as he wrote. See Book review, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Summer 1937), P. 39.

<sup>189</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, book review, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Summer 1937), P. 39. "There is corroborate evidence from many sources that these charges are approximately correct," Niebuhr commented on Trotsky's above views of the current situation in the Soviet Union.

<sup>190</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Russian Mystery", *Radical Religion*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Autumn 1937), P. 5. The horror of the Red Army purge later prompted him to list an impressively long list of the executions and disappearances of Russian generals in *Radical Religion*, See "The Red Army Purge", *Radical Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Summer 1938), P. 11.

<sup>191</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "On the International Situation", *Radical Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Spring 1938), P. 5.

<sup>192</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Traitors on Trial: Verbatim Report of the Moscow Trials", *Radical Religion*, Vol.3, No. 3 (Summer 1938), P. 39.

*Radical Religion*, “Russian and Japan”. Already under the impression that “everything is not healthy in her (namely, the Soviet Union’s) household,” Niebuhr found that the latest trial further corroborated the theory that “the Russian system relies too much upon fear and coercion.”<sup>193</sup> The cumulative evidence, he observed, “points to a tragic deterioration of Russian politics.”<sup>194</sup> They also illustrated that Russia, allegedly “a worker’s democracy,” actually “lacks the most elementary democratic safeguards against the misuse of power.”<sup>195</sup> With Europe teetering on the brink of war, Niebuhr seemed to be under the impression that the capitalist societies were fated to collapse. “We had reason to expect the gradual self-destruction of a capitalistic society.”<sup>196</sup> However, if such a self-destruction of capitalism sounded “tragic”, then for Niebuhr, the Moscow Trials were in some respects more “disheartening”. “The growth of political tyranny in a socialist society,” he wrote woefully, was “really a more tragic fact. It is like the premature death of an infant rather than death which follows senescence.”<sup>197</sup>

How much the Russian experiment meant to Reinhold Niebuhr could not be expressed more vividly than by this analogy. Ever since he made his journey to the “land of promise” in 1930, for much of the eventful decade, Niebuhr had been pinning his hopes for the birth of a new type of society on the growing up of this “infant”. Now that this “infant” had died prematurely, dashing the only glimmer of hope at a time when the old Europe was dying a slow death as well, what could a Christian socialist expect when

---

<sup>193</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia and Japan”, P. 3.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

looking beyond these tragedies? Ruminating on the implications of the latest Moscow Trial, Niebuhr's concluded:

We might as well make up our minds to the fact that a new society must be brought to birth in European civilization without too much help from the Russian experiment. Politically, radicalism will have to learn the lesson that the destruction of democratic checks upon the power of the state, however inevitable in a day of social crisis, cannot be regarded with complacency...Religiously, we have to learn the lesson that Christian socialists cannot afford to be complacent toward the utopian dreams of Marxism.<sup>198</sup>

Given the international situation, one would expect a radical who had invested too many hopes in the Russian experiment to be wallowing in despair at this juncture. But as can be seen from his above observation, here Niebuhr appeared to be remarkably clear-headed and did not sound like a person devoid of hope at all. On the contrary, a deep sense of tenacity in striving to bring "a new society" to birth can easily be detected in these remarks. There was always hope beyond tragedy, because as he asserted previously in the preface of *Beyond Tragedy*, "the Christian view of history passes through the sense of the tragic to a hope and an assurance which is 'beyond tragedy'."<sup>199</sup> Christians, to use one of his favorite quotes from the Bible, were "perplexed but not onto despair". In fact, not only did Niebuhr's remarks here not convey any sense of despair, but they also signaled the direction toward which he would be heading in the following decade and onwards, that is, towards a deeper appreciation (followed by a more vigorous espousal) of Western democracy and a distinctly realistic approach to power politics.

---

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, Preface, x.

This new direction was expressed more clearly later when he looked back on the tumultuous decade on the eve of the Second World War. The title that he chose for an article in the series of “How My Mind Has Changed in This Decade” in *The Christian Century*, “Ten Years That Shook My World”, aptly described how the past decade had impacted him and eventually pushed him toward this new direction. In this article, while still believing that “the Marxian analysis of the relation of economics to politics is essentially correct,”<sup>200</sup> obviously with the Moscow Trials in mind, he remarked that the Marxian understanding of man “had contributed to the development of a tyranny in Russia which almost, though not quite, rivalled fascist tyranny.”<sup>201</sup> The new tyranny in Russia, he added, “may be worse” than the fascist tyranny, because “it extinguished a new hope in a world in which all the old lights were going out.”<sup>202</sup> With this new hope shattered and the old lights being stubbed out, what needed to be done next? Niebuhr’s answer was clear: it was left to Christianity to fulfil the task of “extricating itself from the prejudices and illusions of a culture which is rapidly sinking with the disruption of the civilization which gave it birth.”<sup>203</sup>

Interestingly, having tilted his sword against the windmills of liberalism for nearly a decade as he himself described, Niebuhr now realized that for all its “prejudices and illusions,” liberalism was after all still worth rescuing. The reason was that, he now realized, brutal historical facts had shown that liberalism, “the cultural foundation of

---

<sup>200</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Ten Years That Shook My World”, *The Christian Century*, Vol. 56, No. 17 (April 26, 1939), P. 543.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

western democracy”<sup>204</sup> was healthier when compared with other competing cultures. “Liberalism as a culture,” he remarked, “is still superior to many of the cultures which threaten to displace it politically. It is certainly superior to the primitive and Nietzschean romanticism which expresses itself in fascist politics. It may even prove superior to socialism, if socialism sacrifices the achievements of democracy as it has done in Russia.”<sup>205</sup> The importance that Niebuhr attached to democracy was abundantly clear. “Socialism” without democracy was not worth seeking, for “democracy in politics is a perennial necessity.”<sup>206</sup> All in all, it was apparent that the rise of two new types of tyrannies, namely, the fascist tyranny and the communist tyranny forced upon Niebuhr the danger of unchecked power and the importance of democracy in modern society. This in turn, prompted him to begin looking at liberalism with renewed appreciation.

The question is, how can Christianity be weaned from the bourgeois prejudices and moralism of liberalism? Or in other words, what is Christianity’s proper role in the troubled modern times? After all, this was the fundamental question that Niebuhr had been asking throughout the 1930s. At the end of the turbulent decade that shook his world, Niebuhr, the seasoned Christian realist, provided his answer in this way:

Christianity faces ultimate issues of life which transcend all political vicissitudes and achievements. But the answer which Christian faith gives to man’s ultimate perplexities and the hope which it makes possible in the very abyss of his despair, also throw light upon the immediate historical issues which he faces. Christianity is not a flight into eternity from the tasks and decision of history....Christianity must therefore wage constant war, on the one hand against political religions

---

<sup>204</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Peace and the Liberal Illusion”, *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952), P 84. This piece first appeared in *The Nation* in a series called “Must Democracy Use Force?” *The Nation*, Vol. 148, No. 5 ( January 28, 1939).

<sup>205</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Ten Years That Shook My World”, P. 545.

<sup>206</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics*, P. 85.

which imagine some proximate goal and some conditioned good as man's final good, and on the other hand against an otherworldliness which by contrast gives these political religions a seeming validity.<sup>207</sup>

But before Niebuhr set out to lead Christianity's two-fronted war against political religions and otherworldliness, the Second World War broke out. On August 23, 1939, a day which the then Soviet premier and foreign commissar Molotov hailed as "a date of great historical importance," the Soviet government threw the world into consternation by signing the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact.<sup>208</sup> The nightmare many had feared finally came to pass.

For most radicals (like Niebuhr himself) who had been looking to the Soviet Union for hopes of getting out of the quagmire of capitalism since the Depression hit, the decade of the 1930s undoubtedly ended on a tragic and even more depressing note. In the face of the ruthless purges and show trials, disenchantment with the Russian experiment among them had already been simmering. The Nazi-Soviet Pact came as a final straw. How did Niebuhr react to this pact? The next chapter will look at this issue.

---

<sup>207</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Ten Years That Shook My World", P. 545.

<sup>208</sup> Molotov, "The Meaning of the Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact", Speech to the Supreme Soviet, August 31, 1939. Quoted from Robert Daniels, ed., *A Documental History of Communism and the World: From Revolution to Collapse* (Hanover: University Press of New England), P. 87.

## Chapter Five

### Russia, a Great Comrade: World War II

In addition to his masterpiece *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, the other book that Niebuhr brought out at the beginning of the 1940s was *Christianity and Power Politics* (1940). To some extent, the title of this book could be seen as an apt description of his main concern during the war, that is, how to bring Christianity to bear upon power politics of a world at war.

The problem of power politics was certainly not new to Niebuhr. In fact, marked by the publication of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, in which he openly advocated the use of power in seeking justice, one of Niebuhr's major efforts in the 1930s could well be summarized as an attempt to foster a Christian political ethic which emphasized the necessity of the use of power in politics. By analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of Christian politics and the communist religion in the mid-1930s, Niebuhr had already drawn the conclusion that any realistic analysis of politics must recognize the inevitability of conflict and coercion in man's collective enterprises. The upheaval in Soviet politics in the late 1930s further brought home to Niebuhr another factor of power politics, namely, the danger of the abuse of power by the new ruling class.

Before the outbreak of World War II, however, Niebuhr's concern with power politics was largely confined to possible conflicts between different social groups within a society, or put more specifically, the power struggle between the proletarian and the bourgeois classes of the capitalist society. The onset of the war, coupled with the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, brought the problems of power politics in the international area into sharp relief. For Niebuhr, the Nazi-Soviet Pact, more than anything else, laid bare the fact that any transcendent disinterestedness in the field of world politics is extremely hard, if not impossible to achieve. World politics is first and foremost based on the instinct of survival for any nation. Beyond the level of survival, world politics also entails the use of power in subduing any evil forces that threaten world peace. This was the rationale behind the thesis of *Christianity and Power Politics*, in which Niebuhr flayed modern Christian and secular perfectionism, which placed a premium upon non-participation in conflict. Furthermore, to maintain international peace, it is necessary to adopt a pragmatic approach to world politics. This means, for the sake of order, sometimes one needs to reluctantly assume that "one's biggest enemy's biggest enemy is to some extent one's friend."<sup>1</sup> That was why, as Niebuhr advocated during the war, that the Soviet Union, for all its tyrannical streak, needed to be treated as a great comrade in arms by the West. A pragmatic approach to world politics also involves finding a way to extend this kind of comradeship into peacetime. In fact, the question of "what kind of comradeship can be established after the war is over" remained constantly on Niebuhr's mind while the war was raging.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> "The Madness of Myths", Book Review, *Europe at War 1939-1945: No Simple Victory*, By Norman Davies, *The Economist* (November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2006), P. 86.

<sup>2</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Russia and the Western World", *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 7, No.3 (Summer, 1942), P. 7.

Divided into three sections, this chapter first looks at how Niebuhr's understanding of power politics deepened in reaction to the chaotic world scene, in particular, the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact. It then focuses on his pragmatic approach to international politics by examining his remarkably conciliatory attitudes toward the Soviet Union both during the war and in his vision of the postwar world order.

### **An End to Illusions**

In Niebuhr's view, the Second World War was "both a revelation and a consequence of the total crisis in which Western civilization stood."<sup>3</sup> For a Christian socialist who had long been keenly aware of the menace of the Nazis, who had furthermore been pinning his hopes for a better society on the premise of the collapse of the old capitalist system, the outbreak of the war was in a sense really not surprising at all. Still, as he expressed repeatedly on the eve of the war, the death of the doomed old capitalist social order was tragic. But for radicals like him, what was even more tragic had already occurred before the war, that is, the growth of political tyranny in a socialist society as illustrated by the Moscow Trials.

Prompted by this "tragedy", as mentioned in the previous chapter, prior to the outbreak of the war, Niebuhr already came to the conclusion that the building of a new society in Europe could not count on much help from the Russian experiment. The sense of

---

<sup>3</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, Editorial, "The International Situation", *Radical Religion*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Winter 1940), P. 1. This article also appeared as Chapter 10, "The False Answers to Our Unsolved Problems" in *Christianity and Power Politics*.

disillusionment in this judgment was unmistakable. But on the other hand, for Niebuhr, disillusionment with the Russian experiment in the late 1930s in a sense cushioned further severe blows resulting from the behavior of the Soviet government in the initial stages of the war. Thus when the world was flabbergasted by the Nazi-Soviet Non-aggression Pact in the fall of 1939, as someone who had predicted and feared it as a possibility, Niebuhr sounded extraordinarily cool-headed in the face of so astounding a world event.

Commenting on the Pact in an editorial of *Radical Religion*, Niebuhr observed that “from the standpoint of power politics nothing was more logical than the pact between Hitler and Stalin.”<sup>4</sup> Why did the law of power politics make such a notorious pact “logical”? If one dealt with politics “realistically”, he explained, one can easily discover that in every national organism there was “a primal instinct of survival.”<sup>5</sup> In the case of the Soviet Union, faced with a threat of invasion which did not lack precedent in its history, a threat which was complicated further by the West’s reluctance to form an alliance with it, the Russians therefore “counted discretion the better part of valor and made a pact with the enemy.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, in terms of power politics, Stalin’s decision to stave off a dire threat from Nazi Germany by signing this non-aggression pact could in a sense be “justified” on the ground of the Soviet Union’s own security concerns. On Germany’s side, needless to say, the Pact fitted perfectly into Hitler’s strategic planning by

---

<sup>4</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, Editorial, “The Hitler-Stalin Pact”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Fall 1939), P. 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, P. 2

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*.

temporarily averting a conflict with a formidable foe. In a word, the Hitler-Stalin Pact “conformed to the law of nations in so far as that is the law the jungle.”<sup>7</sup>

But the real significance of the Nazi-Soviet Non-aggression Pact could not be just interpreted in terms of power games that different countries play out of their own defensive necessity. To explain it away in that way would be tantamount to mere cynicism. As he made clear in “Ideology and Pretense”, the real issue of the Pact “did not lie in the use of power, but in the relation of national interests to the universal values which transcend a nation.”<sup>8</sup> It is logical that every national entity seeks to defend its interests out of its primal instinct of survival, using force if such need arises. But in doing so, nations tend to sanctify their own action by claiming to be advancing certain universal cultural and ideal values which transcend national interests. That was why until securing a pact with the Soviet Union, Germany could claim that it was fighting not only for its own existence but also for the purpose of shielding the world from the evil of bolshevism. In the same vein, it also explained why in the case of the Soviet Union, that before signing the pact with its enemy, it hailed the united-front movement that it led as a bulwark against fascism. Therefore, the underlying law in power politics was, “nations can and do support higher values than their own if there is a coincidence between the higher values and the impulse of survival.”<sup>9</sup> After all, examples of this sort abound in history. Witness how France went about advancing the universal principles of freedom, equality and fraternity under Napoleon.

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, P. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Ideology and Pretense”, in *Christianity and Power Politics*, P. 107. This article first appeared in *The Nation* on December 9, 1939.

<sup>9</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Hitler-Stalin Pact”, P. 2.

Viewed in this light, the fact that a socialist nation made a U-turn and befriended its foremost foe, in Niebuhr's eyes, embodied the consummate pretense and ideology in world power politics. The tint of pretense and ideology was rendered particularly poignant by the desperate effort to preserve the alleged righteousness and transcendence of the Soviet Union on the part of the "comrades" and "fellow-travellers" who believed that the Soviet Union represented a force of pure disinterestedness in politics. Out of their loyalty to the communist cause, some communist papers defended the Stalin-Hitler Pact by claiming that in signing that Pact, Stalin effectively circumvented the appeasement policy. Others declared that it was the fear of the great Red Army that brought Hitler to heel. Still others praised Stalin's move because he wisely broke up the axis by disassociating Japan from Germany. All these arguments, Niebuhr fulminated, "outrage the simplest logic."<sup>10</sup> In reality, he pointed out, "all the evidence points to the fact that the defensive, and possibly the imperialistic, requirements of the Russian State, rather than the strategic considerations of the workers' cause, determine Russian policy."<sup>11</sup>

With his reactions to the Nazi-Soviet Pact briefly introduced, now it is time to pick up the thread of his growing disillusionment with the Russian experiment, especially after the Moscow Trials. In fact, if one word has to be found to describe the impact that the Pact had on Niebuhr, nothing could be more appropriate than the word "disillusionment". His writings prompted by the Pact were strewn with the word "illusion". In "The Hitler-

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, P. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Ideology and Pretense," P. 111.

Stalin Pact”, he concluded that “the Christian faith stands between the illusions and the despair of the world; it is particularly an antidote to the illusions which are stubbornly held in defiance of the facts in order to save men from despair.”<sup>12</sup> In another editorial for *Radical Religion*, he wrote that “if one begins with the illusion that nationalism is merely the product of capitalism...the way is opened for a not too covert Russian nationalistic imperialism to insinuate itself into the revolutionary cause.”<sup>13</sup> In “Ideology and Pretense”, he pointed out that “its (namely Russia’s) transcendent disinterestedness in the field of world politics is an illusion.”<sup>14</sup> “An end to Illusions”, the article he wrote for *The Nation* was perhaps the most revealing piece in this regard.<sup>15</sup>

While the illusions he referred to in some of these articles were allegedly held by other intellectuals on the left, it would be disingenuous for Niebuhr to say that he himself did not share these illusions.<sup>16</sup> As mentioned in the preceding chapter, even the Moscow Trials did not completely shatter his hopes in the future of a socialist society, as illustrated by his willingness to believe some of the verdicts of the Trials at face value. It has also been emphasized that Niebuhr gave credit to Marxism for its “rediscovery” of the fact that man’s achievements are invariably colored and conditioned by human finiteness and corrupted by sin. In fact, in this regard, just a few months before the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, Niebuhr still subscribed to Marxism’s analysis of

---

<sup>12</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Hitler-Stalin Pact”, P. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The International Situation”, P. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Ideology and Pretense”, in *Christianity and Power Politics*, P. 114.

<sup>15</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “An End to Illusions”, in *Christianity and Power Politics*, P. 167.

<sup>16</sup> See Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Story of a False Religion”, in which Niebuhr looked back at the 1930s and described how “a whole series of shocking disillusionments” impacted the lives of thousands of radicals. *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Summer 1941), P. 6.

ideology and asked “who understands the pretensions of ‘rational objectivity’ in social conflict better than a real Marxist?”<sup>17</sup>

According to the Marxist analysis of ideology, rationalization of interest is characteristic of capitalist society, and nationalism is a product of capitalism. In a socialist society, the state will wither away and nationalism will therefore be transcended. But the fact that out of its own defense needs, the champion of the worker’s cause suddenly struck a deal with its arch enemy, yet at the same time it still claimed to be advancing certain universal values, threw all these Marxist claims about ideology into doubt. Stung by the Pact, Niebuhr now admitted that “the Marxist theory of ideology would have to be reexamined.”<sup>18</sup> For all its merits in rediscovering the ideological taint of bourgeois society, he wrote, “Marxist theory has become a source of moral and political confusion by attributing ideology to economic class interest alone, when as a matter of fact the ideological taint is a permanent factor of human culture on every level of advance.”<sup>19</sup> It was high time, therefore, for radicals who were devoted to the Russian cause to shed the illusion that a socialist society was free of ideology and pretense. The contemporary task, he concluded, was to unmask the rationalizations of the Marxists who “wrongly assume that the class organization of society is the sole source of ideological pretension.”<sup>20</sup> For people who had thrown in their lot with the Russian experiment, it was time to wake up

---

<sup>17</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Peace and the Liberal Illusions”, in *Christianity and Power Politics*, P. 91.

<sup>18</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Ideology and Pretense”, P. 112.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, P. 114.

to the painful fact that the pretensions of Russia had to be judged like those of any other nation.<sup>21</sup>

Niebuhr was not slow in discarding his own illusions. In the spring of 1940, just a few months after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, he promptly resigned from the Socialist Party, which he had joined a decade earlier with hopes that it would become a coalition of intellectuals and workers in their joint cause of creating a socialist society. Now that the Party had failed to live up to its original objective, and the only Socialist society had brought dismay to radicals who harbored socialist aspirations, there was no point clinging to an organization that exuded utopianism in the face of dire international situations. It was really time for an end to illusions. Niebuhr recounted his resignation from the Socialist Party in the article "An End to Illusions".<sup>22</sup> After receiving a letter from the Socialist Party informing him that his views on foreign affairs were at odds with the Party's position and asking him to give account of his nonconformity,<sup>23</sup> Niebuhr answered the Socialist communication "by a quick resignation from the party."<sup>24</sup> The letter from the Socialist Party, he wrote, with a heightened awareness of the nature of power politics, was an expression of utopianism which "creates confusion in politics by measuring all significant historical distinctions against purely ideal perspectives and

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> This article first appeared in *The Nation* on June 29, 1940.

<sup>23</sup> The Party's position was that the Second World War is a clash of rival imperialism. At its April convention the Party reaffirmed its neutral stance on the conflict.

<sup>24</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "An End to Illusions", P. 168. Niebuhr's reply was indeed swift and curt. In his letter to the party executive secretary Irving Barshop, he wrote, "I have no intention of conforming to the discipline of the Party on the question of American responsibility in Europe." Niebuhr to Barshop, May 24, 1940, RN Papers.

blinding the eye to differences which may be matters of life and death in a specific instance.”<sup>25</sup>

With the launch of *Radical Religion* in 1935, Niebuhr and other likeminded Christian radicals had been seeking to clarify the affinities and divergences in Marxism and Christian thought in an effort to reconstruct liberal Christianity so that it could come to terms with a Marxian economic and political strategy.<sup>26</sup> In terms of economic strategy, what appealed to Niebuhr the most in Marxism was undoubtedly the tenet of socialization of property. But with the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-aggression Pact, “Russia had proved,” Niebuhr wrote ruefully in the last issue of *Radical Religion*, “that the ownership of property is not the only form of irresponsible power which creates injustice.”<sup>27</sup> Although he would continue to regard the socialization of property as a basic requirement for creating a better society well into mid-1940s, his belief in this Marxist tenet was obviously not unqualified any more. With regard to Marxian political strategy, while in the inaugural issue of *Radical Religion* Niebuhr declared that a socialist Christian was convinced that justice in modern society cannot be achieved without struggle, his understanding of justice and power struggle, as previous analysis showed, had underwent a significant change after the Moscow Trials. Since a socialist country was equally capable of injustice, as the recent Nazi-Soviet Pact had proved, how illusory it would be if one continued to invest hope in a Marxist political strategy. Under such circumstances, what was the use of a “radical religion,” if there was any use for it at all when the lights of social radicalisms were going out?

---

<sup>25</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “An End to Illusions”, P. 169.

<sup>26</sup> See Chapter 4, Section “The Need for a Radical Religion”.

<sup>27</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The International Situation”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1940), P. 1.

As the founder of *Radical Religion*, Niebuhr realized more than any one else how futile and inappropriate it was to hold on to an apparently lost cause. In the spring of 1940, around the same time he quit the Socialist Party, Niebuhr officially put the issue of changing the name of *Radical Religion* before its readers. The need to adopt a new name for this quarterly was also prompted by various protests and suggestions from its readers.<sup>28</sup> Before the name changing issue was brought up in the journal, members of the Fellowship of Christian Socialist had already discussed this issue at a previous meeting, in which three names were put forward: *Prophetic Christianity*, *Social Christianity* and *Christianity and Social Reconstruction*. The Fellowship now wanted to put the names to a vote among its readers. Echoing some readers' protest against the old name, which he agreed was "subject to misunderstanding of various sorts," Niebuhr spelt out the Fellowship's (or rather, his own) stance on this matter in the last issue of the journal.<sup>29</sup> While at its birth the journal, it was declared that the journal was devoted to a "radical Christianity," now its architect admitted that "Radical Religion" was "rather a misnomer for the stand which the Fellowship takes on social issues. We are not trying to reconstruct a unique kind of radical religion."<sup>30</sup> Had Niebuhr reread the inaugural issue of *Radical Religion* carefully, he could have honestly written that indeed he and his colleagues had been trying to reconstruct a radical religion, but they would not do so any more. If his statement on this issue sounded not entirely convincing, his determination to break away from the radical camp was nevertheless unequivocal: "...we have rejected the utopian illusions of Marxism and, in fact, all elements in Marxist thought which raise it to

---

<sup>28</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "A New Name", *Radical Religion*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1940, P. 4.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "A New Name", *Radical Religion*, P. 4.

the status of a religion claiming to solve the ultimate problems of mankind and attributing all human ills and evils to the class structure of society.”<sup>31</sup>

With this verdict on Marxism, or on his decade-long radical pursuit to be more accurate, Niebuhr officially declared the end of “radical religion.” “Christianity and Society”, a name which can hardly give any hint of either the quarterly’s past or future mission was eventually adopted in preference to “Prophetic Christianity” and “Christianity and Social Reconstruction.” Compared with the editorials of the inaugural issue of *Radical Religion*, the new mission that Niebuhr and his colleagues set themselves was more cool-headed and modest. “Whatever the name,” he wrote in the inaugural issue under the new name, “we want to devote ourselves with new vigor to the cause of releasing the energies of Christian faith for the cause of social reconstruction.”<sup>32</sup> But given that the very survival of western society was facing a critical moment, one cannot help but wonder how much vigor Niebuhr and his disciples could actually devote to “social reconstruction.”

Indeed, as the future that *Christianity and Society* stood for seemed remote under the cloud of the Nazi menace, though the quarterly persisted through the war, it gradually “shrank to a shadow of its former self.”<sup>33</sup> The new outlet that Niebuhr found for his boundless energy was the journal that he and his friends like Pit Van Dusen and Francis Miller founded in early 1941. Fittingly entitled “Christianity and Crisis”, this new journal set out with the aim of uniting Christian interventionists of all political stripes.

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Christianity and Society”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1940. P. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, P. 197.

As a sign of his overriding concern with the crisis in Europe and the Far East, Niebuhr himself penned five pieces on the war and crisis in the first issue of the new journal.<sup>34</sup> With his mind and soul occupied with the defense of bourgeois democracy in the face of crisis as such, it is little wonder that *Christianity and Society*, which “breathed the borrowed air of early thirties social radicalism” after the renaming would cease to be his personal megaphone on both political and theological issues.<sup>35</sup> This, in a sense, vividly illustrated his determination to honor his promise of “an end to illusions.”

### **Russia, a Comrade in Arms**

As Niebuhr described, having gone through a whole series of shocking disillusionments, first the trials and purges, then the Nazi-Soviet Pact, some intellectuals on the left, like Sidney Hook and Max Eastman, two formerly prominent communist believers, not only declared an end to illusions as Niebuhr himself did, but also declared “the once true church to be antichrist.”<sup>36</sup> Equally disillusioned, did Niebuhr turn into a fierce “anti-communist”, as was often alleged? Given his broadsides against Marxism in the closing issue of *Radical Religion*, one would assume that at least he would begin to adopt a hostile attitude toward the Soviet regime. In reality, it was the opposite. Despite the conclusion he reached after the Nazi-Soviet Pact that “the faith of millions in a movement which would emancipate the workers of the world has degenerated into a pitiful adjunct of Russian foreign policy,” Niebuhr vigorously advocated that the Soviet Union must be

---

<sup>34</sup> These are: “The Christian Faith and the World Crisis”; “The Crisis”, “Holy Wars”; “The Lend-Lease Bill”; “The World After the War”. *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (February 10, 1941), P. 3.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, P. 197.

<sup>36</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Story of A False Religion”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Summer 1940), P. 7.

treated as a comrade rather than an enemy throughout the war period.<sup>37</sup> In a way, the seeming inconsistency between his disillusionment with the Russian experiment and his staunch support for the Soviet Union during World War II perfectly embodied the kind of political realism that he had been endeavoring to foster.

Like many, before Hitler eventually turned his powerful war machine on the Soviet Union in June 1941, Niebuhr was very doubtful whether the Red Army, its morale so low after the ruthless purges, could withstand a possible German attack. Thus in the Summer of 1941, as Germany had conquered France and most of Western Europe, he observed that "...Russia is shivering in her boots with fear that the formidable Nazi military machine will cut through the Ukraine, like a knife through butter...".<sup>38</sup> However, in the face of the seemingly inexorable march of the German troops, though dismayed by the Nazi-Soviet Pact and very uncertain about the strength of the Soviet Union's armed forces, Niebuhr still hoped that the Soviet Union could be brought into an alliance with the West in overcoming the evil of the Nazis. Therefore, when the Soviet Union made territorial claims upon the Baltic states and Poland, he appeared quite willing to support its demands. In his view, these claims "do not represent insuperable obstacles to effective collaboration between Russia and the western world."<sup>39</sup> Given that at this point the Nazi-Soviet Pact still held, such a conciliatory attitude toward the Soviet Union from a disillusioned radical was indeed remarkable. It reflected how well Niebuhr had mastered the art of power politics. "Politics deals with secondary evils and proximate

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Russia and the Peace", *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Summer 1941), P. 8.

goals of justice.”<sup>40</sup> Consequently, to seek greater justice, sometimes one has to come to terms with the lesser evil.

When Hitler betrayed its Soviet partner by launching the largest military invasion in history, as Niebuhr recounted, “the anxieties of the world catastrophe are in some level of the consciousness of every person fully alive to contemporary history.”<sup>41</sup> Fears that the Russians might collapse as other victims of the Nazis had done prevailed. A Russian defeat, Niebuhr worried, would cause the western nations, particularly America to lose the resolution to continue the struggle. But as the Red Army put up stiff resistance, not only did Niebuhr feel “a new assurance,” but he was also quick to acknowledge his “prejudices” against Russia.<sup>42</sup> Thus merely a few months into the war, although it was still unclear whether the Russians could hold their lines, he admitted that “it has been long enough to prove most of us wrong in regard to Russia.”<sup>43</sup> The Russian people’s strength of resistance was obviously underestimated by those who expected that the weaknesses of morale would make it impossible for the Russians to carry on. Perhaps the strength of Russia’s communist system was underestimated as well. Deeply impressed by the Russian people’s robust will to live in the face of the Nazi invasion, Niebuhr posed himself the question of whether the basis of the Russian strength had to do with communism itself.<sup>44</sup> Displaying his residual hope in socialism, he observed that “we are

---

<sup>40</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Story of A False Religion”, P. 7.

<sup>41</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Russians and Our Interdependence”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 1, No. 15,(August 25, 1941), P. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, see also Reinhold Niebuhr, “Lessons from Russian Resistance”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Fall 1941), P. 3.

<sup>43</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Russians and Our Interdependence”, P. 1.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

not certain whether the Russian will to live is something primarily derived from sources of uncorrupted vitality in the Russian heart, or whether it is primarily communist.”<sup>45</sup>

As mentioned, though disillusioned with the Russian experiment, Niebuhr still clung to the Marxist tenet of collective ownership of property at the beginning of the 1940s. When he proposed to scrap the name of “Radical Religion”, he made it clear that “we believe that the socialization of property is a basic condition of health in a technical society.”<sup>46</sup> The Russian people’s brave resistance against the Nazis only seemed to temporarily strengthen his belief as such. The fact that all Soviet society was mobilized for the cause of war and no private interest had been allowed to impede the war effort suggested to Niebuhr that “collective ownership has given Russia one advantage which the so-called democratic nations have lacked.”<sup>47</sup> This was true, he emphasized, even if the sources of Russian resistance were perhaps primarily Russian rather than communist. In his view, the reason why Russia became the first nation which had been able to withstand the German attack was “precisely because private interest has been subordinated to the nation” as in Germany.<sup>48</sup>

Whatever the real basis of the Russian people’s strength in fending off the Nazi invasion, what really concerned Niebuhr was, as he chose to title one editorial of *Christianity and Crisis*, the issue of “The Russians and Our Interdependence” in war and peace. The Russian people’s ability to resist the German thrust so resolutely not only brought a sense

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “A New Name”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1940, P. 4.

<sup>47</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Lessons from Russian Resistance”, P. 3.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, P. 4.

of assurance to those who were watching the war closely as Niebuhr himself did, but also created a sense of gratitude among Christians who did not believe that “the Christian faith is adequately expressed by the mere avoidance of war.”<sup>49</sup> More importantly, Niebuhr observed, the fact that the Russians were stubbornly holding their lines renewed “a holy sense of the unity of the human family – a reverent appreciation of the fact that we are all tied together in this bundle of life.”<sup>50</sup> That was because, he pointed out, “whether the Russians continue their resistance or finally collapse might possibly determine the fate of our civilization for decades to come.”<sup>51</sup> Guided by this realistic view of the world situation, Niebuhr called on the western nations, in particular, the United States, to forge a comradeship with the Soviet Union by furnishing aid to the Russians so that they could continue their resistance. Russia’s partnership in war and peace, as his writings during the war period demonstrated, remained the most critical issue for Niebuhr ever since Hitler drew the Soviet Union out of isolation. This tireless effort in advocating compromise and cooperation through war and peace time with a totalitarian regime was a perfect reflection of Niebuhr’s realistic approach to politics.

Although for Niebuhr himself, it was obvious that “history has thrown us into the most fateful comradeship of arms with Russia,” he understood well that many Americans, given the traditional anti-Russian feeling in America, were uneasy about a partnership with a totalitarian regime which had been forced to abandon its pact with the Nazis recently.<sup>52</sup> There were also those who were diametrically opposed to the idea of

---

<sup>49</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Russians and Our Interdependence”, P. 1.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, P. 2.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia and the Western World”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Summer

cooperating with the communist regime, whether during or after the war. Broadly, these people could be divided into three different groups, namely, the pious who detested Russian atheism; those who abhorred the notion of the socialization of property; and those who loathed the political dictatorship of the Soviet Union. It would be “catastrophic”, Niebuhr worried, if these anti-Russian feelings were allowed to determine America’s foreign policy.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, besides his attacks on American isolationism in *Christianity and Power Politics*, he spared no effort in addressing this issue in the pages of *Christianity and Crisis* and *Christianity and Society*.

In the winter of 1941, when the Nazi forces bore down on Moscow, Niebuhr urged Britain and the United States to come to Russia’s rescue by furnishing essential aid to the beleaguered Russians. In discussing the serious Russian situation, he pointed out that the degree of American aid would partly depend upon “how the issue of anti-Russian feeling, particularly in Catholic circles” was handled.<sup>54</sup> The reason why here Niebuhr singled out the Catholic circles in this discussion was because, from the advent of the Soviet regime to power, the Catholic Church in America had been following the Vatican in unsparing condemnation of Soviet communism.<sup>55</sup> Not oblivious to the religious suppression in the Soviet Union, he conceded that it would be unwise to deny the communist regime’s brutality in uprooting religion. Nevertheless, he argued, “it is

---

1942), P. 7.

<sup>53</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia’s Partnership in War and Peace”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (February 23, 1942), P. 2.

<sup>54</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Russian Situation”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 1, No. 19 (November 3, 1941), P. 2.

<sup>55</sup> Later on, Niebuhr praised Rome’s conciliatory and realistic approach in dealing with the communist regime when it extended an olive branch to the Soviet Union. In his view, the U-turn in Vatican’s policy towards Russia was necessitated by the rules of powers politics. See “The Vatican and the Soviet Union,” *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 3, No. 12 ( July 12, 1943), P. 1.

equally unwise, not to say immoral, to use this occasion to bargain with the Russians.”<sup>56</sup> The rationale for this is plain. Realistically speaking, he pointed out, Russia’s resistance ultimately contributed to the preservation of liberties in the Western world. It was therefore in the West’s interest to lend Russia a hand at such a critical moment. Besides, he added, obviously in an optimistic mood, the West may well hope that “the companionship in a common purpose”, or “the fateful comradeship of the moment”, would prompt the Russian regime to disavow its political fanaticisms.<sup>57</sup>

With regards to the deep-seated anti-Russian feeling from those who feared the Soviet Union’s dictatorship and the socialization of property, aside from explaining that the fate of the Russian people was intertwined with that of the western societies in overcoming the evil of Nazism, Niebuhr took pains to expound on the benefits that the West could gain in fostering a partnership with Russia during and after the war. As in the near future there was little possibility of Russia converting to democracy, and little likelihood for the West to accept the Russian creed either, “nations embodying various cultures had to learn to live together.”<sup>58</sup> For the West, any realistic analysis of the world situation should recognize that “we will have to come to terms with Russia though it has some virtues which threaten our vices and also embodies some vices which threaten our virtues.”<sup>59</sup> Russia’s virtues, obviously, in Niebuhr’s view, were the collective ownership of property, which gave Russia an edge over its western counterparts in mobilizing the whole of society in times of war, though it already dawned on him that the abolition of private

---

<sup>56</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Russian Situation”, P. 2.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia and the Western World”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Summer 1942), P. 8.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

property did not itself guarantee justice. As to the virtues of Western society, apart from a dynamic democracy, unlike before, he came to realize that “there are some forms of justice in the capitalistic world which are derived from the competition between economic and political power, which have been lost in Russia.”<sup>60</sup> It is significant that though still harboring residual hopes in socialism at this point, Niebuhr clearly began to appreciate and cherish the advantages of capitalism, both in terms of politics and economics. The former radical, who openly advocated the use of power in overthrowing the capitalist system, was indeed mellowing, well on his way to becoming a “theologian of the establishment” as some labelled him.

By coming to terms with Russia, again, optimistic about the prospect of a Russo-Western partnership, Niebuhr believed that “a real comradeship in an international community will, no doubt, prompt some interchange of cultural and spiritual values.”<sup>61</sup> The result would be that Russia’s internal policy “will be leavened by influences from the western democracies; for the present partnership is bound to dissolve some fears and misunderstandings,” while on the West’s part, “it is not even inconceivable that we might learn something from Russia.”<sup>62</sup> To achieve all this, Niebuhr realized, the fact that Russia remained a totalitarian regime would pose the biggest obstacle. After all, in America, there were those who denounced communism as purely evil to the extent that the evils of the Nazis even paled in comparison. Take Frank Buchman, the Oxford group revivalist, for instance. On returning from Europe when the Second World War broke out, Buchman once remarked that “I thank heaven for a man like Adolf Hitler, who built

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

a front-line defense against the anti-Christ of communism.”<sup>63</sup> In dealing with this kind of communism-phobia and hatred, with the Russians fighting strenuously against the Nazis as the background, Niebuhr cautioned, “if the Russians hold firm, because or despite of a political creed which the Western world abhors, she wins our gratitude and compels us to reexamine our prejudices.”<sup>64</sup>

One of the West’s fatal prejudices against Russia, in Niebuhr’s view, was undoubtedly the equation of communism and Nazism. Never soft on the dark sides of communism himself, he nevertheless soberly observed that it was critical to “make distinction between types of totalitarianism and recognize that, whatever the perils of Russian totalitarianism, communism is an essentially universalistic doctrine and it never glorified a single race or nation as the source of all power.”<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, Russia never made force self-justifying as the Nazis did. Niebuhr had made similar remarks with regards to the distinctions of Nazism and communism before. But as the battle between Nazism and communism was raging, and a lasting peace would in his view, very much depend on how the West dealt with communism, he realized how a clear distinction between the differences of the two types of totalitarianism would impact the post-war world order. Worried that the equation of Nazism and communism might influence American foreign policy, he therefore highlighted the differences between the two totalitarianisms again and again in his writings on the world conflict. Communism, he emphasized in “The Perils of Our Foreign Policy,” though it may be regarded as a heresy, was still a Christian

---

<sup>63</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Hitler and Buchman”, *Christianity and Power Politics*, P. 159.

<sup>64</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Notes on the World Conflict”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Autumn 1942), P. 11.

<sup>65</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia and the Western World”, P. 8.

heresy, “because its ultimate objective is the establishment of universal standards of justice,” while the Nazi tyranny represented “anti-Christian nihilism.”<sup>66</sup> Not all forms of totalitarianism were equally dangerous. Only nations and political systems which glorified power as an end itself such as Nazism were anti-social in their very structure.<sup>67</sup> In short, the west could and should come to terms with communism but not with Nazism.<sup>68</sup>

### **Russia, a Partner after the War**

As the previous section has shown, even while the war was raging, the problem of the post-war world order weighed quite heavily on Niebuhr’s mind. As early as 1940, he talked about “The Issue of a Just Peace” in the editorials of *Christianity and Society*.<sup>69</sup> With the Soviet Union being drawn into the war, thereby forming a “fateful comradeship of arms” with the west, Niebuhr’s concern about the peace arrangement became more focused: “The question is, what kind of comradeship can be established after the war is over?”<sup>70</sup> When it appeared certain that the Nazis’ days were numbered, he made it even

---

<sup>66</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Perils of Our Foreign Policy”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Spring 1943), P. 21.

<sup>67</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia and the Western World”, P. 9.

<sup>68</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Perils of Our Foreign Policy”, P. 21.

<sup>69</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Issue of a Just Peace”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Spring 1940). P.1-P.2. In this editorial, Niebuhr cautioned that the issue of a just peace is “whether a peace can be made which will lift the problem of national security on a new level of international interdependence or whether the victors will merely seek immediate security by a vindictive peace which will annihilate the foe.” This was also the point he touched up in an earlier editorial in *Radical Religion*. See “The International Situation”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1940, P. 4.

<sup>70</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia and the Western World”, P. 7.

clearer that the problem of the relationship between Russia and the West, in particular America, must be regarded “as the primary hazard to a future peace.”<sup>71</sup>

If it stands to reason that a comradeship with Russia was essential to the very existence of western liberties during the war, why was a partnership with Russia so critical for the West in the post-war period? What exactly was the significance of working in partnership with a totalitarian regime for the West in the new world order?

As stated earlier, the dialectic relationship between love and justice is of central position in Niebuhr’s political and theological thoughts. In the process of searching for a viable Christian political ethic in the 1930s, Niebuhr already came to the view that while love was the ultimate ideal in the area of ethics, justice was the highest achievable ideal in the political arena. The problem of politics was ultimately the problem of justice. In his own words, the question of politics was “how to coerce the anarchy of conflicting human interests into some kind of order, offering human beings the greatest possible opportunity for mutual support.”<sup>72</sup> When Niebuhr wrote these words, the justice he had in mind was mainly associated with justice within a certain society. It referred largely to the political ideal for the capitalist nations which were plagued with injustice. With the whole world thrown into chaos, Niebuhr’s attention gradually shifted to the problem of international justice. Nations, like different social groups within a society, also live under the tension of the ideal of justice and the facts of injustice. So for Niebuhr, how to achieve

---

<sup>71</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia and the Peace”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 4, No. 19 (November 13), 1944, P. 2.

<sup>72</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, P. 150.

international justice, and how to maintain international order after the Nazis were finally defeated, became a question of paramount importance.

This was why, not long after the war broke out, Niebuhr became so concerned about the problem of the relation between the Soviet Union and the West in the post-war era. In discussing American foreign policy, as the thrust of the Nazi forces was increasingly blunted by the Soviets, he cautioned, “the problem of justice is finally more important than the problem of order, but not immediately so,” because “the instrument of justice can function only within a framework of order.”<sup>73</sup> When the allied powers’ victory was almost within reach and the issue of a lasting peace became ever more important, he urged the western powers again that “order must come first. Let considerations of justice however be an almost simultaneous second.”<sup>74</sup> In another editorial addressing the outlines of the peace, he emphasized that perhaps “the best policy is to affirm the necessity of sticking to our great allies for the sake of order.”<sup>75</sup>

Apparently, one word stands out in his above observations: order. The ultimate goal in international politics, like domestic politics, was to achieve justice. But the most immediate objective for the world community was to maintain order. For the sake of order, nations of different political systems and cultures had to come to terms with each other. In the case of Western democracies, this meant that however hard it might seem, compromises and sometimes sacrifices had to be made in dealing with the totalitarian

---

<sup>73</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Perils of Our Foreign Policy”, P. 18.

<sup>74</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Conference of the ‘Big Three’,” *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (March 5, 1945), P. 1.

<sup>75</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Outlines of the Peace”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 1945, P. 3.

regimes. This was the rationale behind Niebuhr's arguments for extending the wartime comradeship with Russia into a partnership in the post-war era. This realistic approach to international power politics explains why, as a critic of communism, he sounded remarkably conciliatory toward the Soviet regime throughout the war, so much so that he was even accused of "appeasing" the Russians.<sup>76</sup>

When it gradually became clear that the Soviet armies were not only capable of putting up resistance, but also able to go on the offensive, Niebuhr realized that for the West, a strategic consideration of Russia's partnership in war and peace was more important than the question of war time cooperation. Should peace come, it would be certain that Russia and America, with opposing political systems, would emerge as the most powerful nations on earth. From the viewpoint of international power politics, he reckoned, "no matter what constitutional forms may be adopted for the international order after the war, nothing can prevent the victorious nations from possessing a virtual hegemony in the organization of that peace."<sup>77</sup> There existed a potential conflict between the world's most powerful democracy and dictatorship. If the two sides could not reconcile their ideological differences, another world conflict would almost be inevitable. Only by being a partner to any peace arrangements, the threat of a potential, perhaps more deadly conflict could be averted. Moreover, he observed, by forging a partnership, "it was more important that Russia would be a counterbalance to purely Anglo-Saxon interests and would therefore tend to make for a better peace."<sup>78</sup> In other words, an establishment of a

---

<sup>76</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Russia and the West", *Christianity and Society*, Vol.10, No.3 (Summer 1945), P. 6.

<sup>77</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Russia's Partnership in War and Peace", *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 2, No. 2, (February 23, 1942), P. 2.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

balance of power between the victorious nations, chiefly America and the Soviet Union, would not only avoid a possible conflict in the near future, but also ultimately render a durable world peace.

It is significant that by emphasizing the need for a “counterbalance” to Anglo-Saxon interests, Niebuhr clearly foresaw the expansion of power by America, the strongest nation in a war-ravaged world. With its acquired new role, he worried, America would become more imperialistic.<sup>79</sup> The implications were, as the American giant “stirred from his sleep and discovered the larger world,” it would use its economic clout to dominate the world’s economic life; while politically, America would “be inclined, more than any other nation, to identify democracy with the free play of economic enterprise which has been the achievement, the luxury and the vice of the period of bourgeois glory.”<sup>80</sup> Posing as the champion of democracy, which identified liberty with the rights of property, America would, if unconstrained, find it hard to resist the temptation of seeking world hegemony and embark on its road to imperialism, much like the British Empire did in the past century. A communist Russia, though totalitarian in nature, would however offer an effective check on the unbridled expansion of American imperialism.

Such a calculation, expressed in an influential Christian journal by the nation’s prominent religious thinker, was exceedingly remarkable, if not shocking or anti-American to some, given that America was still at war. It is worth pointing out that Niebuhr’s concern about the rise of American imperialism and his “appeasement” of Russia, however, did not by

---

<sup>79</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Nationalism and the Possibilities of Internationalism”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Fall 1943), P. 6.

<sup>80</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Perils of Our Foreign Policy”, P. 19.

any means issue from his residual hopes in the Russian experiment, though as late as 1944, he still believed that “the socialized economy represents some real gains” in Russia.<sup>81</sup> They were but a direct application of the kind of political realism he had been advocating to the pressing problems of contemporary international politics.

If an accord regarding post-war world order could not be worked out between Communist Russia and the Western democracies, Niebuhr worried, the world would run the risk of slipping into another world war, a war of opposing ideologies with Russia and America acting as respective vanguards. In that case, both Russia and America could not escape responsibilities. As he put it, “if the world should fail to achieve a tolerable unity of international life the chief, though not sole, guilt will undoubtedly rest upon Russia and America.”<sup>82</sup> Therefore, “the real peril to the world community comes from the adolescent sense of power in Russia and America.”<sup>83</sup> Given the international situation, this peril was indeed tangible. Militarily, both nations possessed enough power to seek hegemony. Ideologically, both had firm convictions, the one democratic and the other communistic. Economically, both had a sense of mission in regard to their economic systems, with one based on a free play of market forces, while the other based on the collective ownership of property. Under such circumstances, for the sake of order, and ultimately justice, from the West’s standpoint, even an atheist nation should be treated as a partner. From the standpoint of the world community, communist Russia, properly dealt with, could act as an important checking and balancing factor in the post-war world. “The defects of Russian domestic politics do not alter this function of Russia in post-war

---

<sup>81</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Communist Party and Russia”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1944, P. 9.

<sup>82</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Nationalism and the Possibilities of Internationalism”, P. 6.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* P. 5.

reconstruction at all.”<sup>84</sup> The reason, Niebuhr pointed out, was because “the quality of balance and harmony achieved by a community of nations is not absolutely determined by the internal structure of the various nations involved in the community.”<sup>85</sup> In a word, the law of international power politics demanded that “balance and harmony” can sometimes override internal politics. Order must be given top priority, though at the expense of liberty and democracy under some circumstances.

While Niebuhr was critical of both America and the Soviet Union for their effort, or lack of effort rather, in working together for a mutual accord, he was aware that there was much more that America could do to avoid potential conflicts between the two giants. Consequently, he pulled out all the stops to prod the American policy makers to reach out to the Soviet Union and exercise constraints when the latter displayed intransigence, especially with regard to the issue of the reconstruction of Europe.

The organization of the economic and political life of post-war Europe, Niebuhr long worried, “represents the potential source of friction between America and Russia.”<sup>86</sup> He certainly had reasons to worry. Emerging as the two predominant powers of the world, both America and Russia would seek to expand their influence once the war was over. In the aftermath of the war, Europe would in effect become a power vacuum that the two nations would vie to fill. While America wanted Europe to be rebuilt in its own image, the combination of a free market economy and a democratic political system on the

---

<sup>84</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia’s Partnership in War and Peace”, P. 2.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Perils of American Policy”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Spring 1943), P. 20.

continent was anathema to communist Russia. The fact that both nations had a different agenda regarding the reorganization of post-war Europe was complicated by Russia's security concern -- the Russians would never forget that throughout history, Poland had been the corridor through which its enemies had crossed into its territory. With the allied powers bickering over the opening up of a second front, the prospect of post-war cooperation between Russia and the West certainly did not look good. Summing up this situation after the Moscow Conference in 1943, Niebuhr once again warned that the real issue facing Russia and America was "how the continent could be organized so that it would not become either a Russian or an Anglo-Saxon colony, or a cockpit for the rival power impulses of the great powers, nor yet a mere tool of the combined politics of the great powers."<sup>87</sup>

To ensure that relations between Russia and the West did not further deteriorate, Niebuhr urged that the West, or America, should be ready to come to terms with Russia's demand for a strategic frontier on the continent, which involved the partitioning of Poland and Romania and the absorption of the Baltic states. While many in the West regarded the Russian demands as violations of the Atlantic charter, Niebuhr was of the opinion that though these demands were high, "they would not be too high if they paved the way for a system of mutual security."<sup>88</sup> For him, the rationale for this was clear enough. Order and stability in the post-war world should take precedence over international justice, even at the expenses of the national interests of some small nations. Furthermore, the mainspring of Russia's policy with regards to these countries, Niebuhr argued, and would continue to

---

<sup>87</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "From Wilson to Roosevelt", *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Fall 1943), P. 4.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

argue until the war came to an end, was the desire to establish security and national power, rather than advancing revolution.<sup>89</sup> Though the Russian policy did in fact accentuate fears in the West that Russia was bent upon dominating Europe, “it is important to recognize that what seems from one perspective as the impulse to dominate, is from another perspective a desire to guarantee one’s own security. What seems like a threat is usually meant by the agent as a defensive measure.”<sup>90</sup>

Obviously, in Niebuhr’s view, for the west, the best way to understand Russia’s motives in seeking a strategic frontier was to put itself in Russia’s shoes. Drawing lessons from the historical wars it fought with European aggressors, Russia understandably desired to establish a buffer zone on its borders. Ultimately, he believed, what made Russia so bold in its policy-making with regards to its borders sprang from its fears of the West. These fears, in turn, contributed to the mistrust that had bedevilled relations between Russia and the West.

What were the Russians afraid of? In Niebuhr’s view, Russia feared the West mainly for four reasons. First, Munich reminded them that “there were vast numbers of people in the Western world who would have gladly bought immunity from the Nazi peril, if they could have turned its fury toward the East.”<sup>91</sup> The Nazi-Soviet Pact was in a way Russia’s response to the West’s attempt to pit the communists against the Nazis. Second, the Russians knew that “there are even now many people in the West, particularly in the

---

<sup>89</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia and the Post-War World”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Winter 1944), P. 4.

<sup>90</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia and the Peace”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 4, No. 19 (November 13, 1944), P. 2.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

religious world, who think that Russia is a more deadly enemy of civilization than Hitler was.”<sup>92</sup> The example Niebuhr gave here was Father Fulton Sheen, famous for the popular radio broadcast program *The Catholic Hour* at that time.<sup>93</sup> Third, the Russians were not certain that “the constitutional and other difficulties which America faced in determining our relation to the community of nations, might not result in America’s withdrawal from world responsibility.”<sup>94</sup> After all, isolationism was still a potent force in America. Finally, the Russians knew that “the rich democracies had a divided soul....and were afraid of all the revolutionary ferment on the continent.”<sup>95</sup> As proved in Italy and France, these democracies seemed to be ready to pay any price (such as coming to terms with the conservative elements) to crush any revolutionary attempt.

While Niebuhr’s conciliatory attitude towards the Soviet Union was laudable, it is worth noting that he apparently underestimated the danger of communism. Regarding the Soviet Union’s territorial ambitions as largely a defensive measure, he did not share the views of many that the Russians were bent upon making Europe communistic. In early 1942, he was of the opinion that “Communism as an imperialistic religion is probably a spent force,” and “there is, in fact, not the slightest evidence that Russia is given to military imperialism.”<sup>96</sup> Two years later, as the Soviet Union became increasingly assertive regarding the post-war arrangement, and many saw in its territorial demands the rise of Soviet imperialism, Niebuhr still insisted that “Communism has obviously been

---

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Niebuhr often singled out Fulton J. Sheen for his uncompromising anti-communist stance. For example, he once accused Sheen as “intent upon hastening a war with Russia.” See Editorial Notes, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 6, No. 6, (April 15, 1946).

<sup>94</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia and the Peace”, P. 2.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia’s Partnership in War and Peace”, P. 3.

debased to become merely one of many weapons in the Russian armor.”<sup>97</sup> The dissolution of the communist party in America further led him to declare that “communism as a creed of international revolutionary socialism is dead.”<sup>98</sup> In a word, throughout the war period, Niebuhr seemed to be convinced that since the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, international communism had degenerated into an ideological instrument of the Soviet Union’s political policy. While many in the West were concerned that a Russian victory in the war would shed a glow over the realities of a discredited communistic movement and may revive its waning prestige, Niebuhr’s optimistic perception was, “these things are possible. Almost anything is possible in our sorry world. But they are extremely unlikely.”<sup>99</sup>

To be sure, Niebuhr never totally neglected the perils of communism. However, his endorsement of the Soviet Union’s territorial ambitions, coupled with his discounting of the dangers of communism, suggested to some that he had gone too far. With the war in the European theater drawing to an end and yet, despite various wartime conferences, mistrust between the Soviet Union and the West persisting, Niebuhr felt it imperative to explain his “appeasement” approach to the former. As one of those who were “willing to make many concessions to Russia for the sake of an ultimate peace,” he defended their “appeasement” policy this way:

We have to “appease” the Russians because a war with Russia means a civil war within the boundaries of civilization....Whatever the merits or demerits on the one side or the other, a war between us would be spiritually a different matter than a war between ourselves and the Nazis. It would be a civil war within

---

<sup>97</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia and the Peace”, P. 2.

<sup>98</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Communist Party and Russia”, P. 8.

<sup>99</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia’s Partnership in War and Peace”, P. 3.

civilization. Physically it would finally reduce the whole of our civilization to chaos. Politically it would result in social chaos in many western nations. Spiritually it would lead to a divided mind because it could not be fought with that sense of a just cause which the western world had in the present struggle.<sup>100</sup>

As if this was not clear enough, he repeated the same warnings about the dire consequences of a war between the Soviet Union and the West in *Christianity and Crisis* at around the same time.<sup>101</sup> The message Niebuhr sent out was clear: a third world war would mean the destruction of civilization itself, and therefore must be avoided at any cost.

It has been mentioned previously that the threat of a third world war had always seemed genuine to Niebuhr. In 1942, in a discussion about the possibility of a “World War III,” organized by *the Nation*, he warned that complacency about a durable peace would be disastrous.<sup>102</sup> In the fall of 1943, commenting on the recent Moscow conference, he worried that “if matters had drifted, a third world war would have been in the making.”<sup>103</sup> In the Spring of 1944, emphasizing the need for order, he voiced his concerns about a possible world conflict again in an article entitled “World War III Ahead” in *The Nation*.<sup>104</sup> With the advent of the atomic bomb, the stakes became even higher. The issue of the atomic bomb, he worried, was bound to aggravate the deep mistrust that already existed between Russia and the West.<sup>105</sup> If this mistrust continued unabated, it

---

<sup>100</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia and the West”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Summer 1945), P. 6.

<sup>101</sup> To reinforce his arguments, he added – to the dismay of Russia-bashers – “Whatever the defects of the Russian system, it must not be forgotten that it will free many serfs in eastern Europe and will come as an emancipator to millions.” Editorial Note, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 5, No. 11 (June 25, 1945), P. 2.

<sup>102</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Thoughts on ‘World War III’,” *The Nation*, Vol. 155, No. 2 (July 11, 1942), P. 32.

<sup>103</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “From Wilson to Roosevelt”, P. 4.

<sup>104</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “World War III Ahead?” *The Nation*, Vol. 158, No. 13 (March 25, 1944), P. 356-358.

<sup>105</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Atomic Bomb”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Fall 1945), P. 5, See also “The Atomic Issue”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 5, No. 16 (October 1, 1945), P. 5-7.

would mean “almost certain conflict between ourselves and Russia,” and “if such a conflict came, it would be more horrible than the past war not only because atomic destruction will make it more terrible but also because it will be a civil war inside of civilization.”<sup>106</sup> Shortly after the war ended, when President Harry Truman asked the congress for a new conscription act, which required one year of military training for every able-bodied American youth, Niebuhr warned that the passage of such an act would be sending out a message that America was “preparing for a third world war.”<sup>107</sup>

It was clear, therefore, what drove Niebuhr into a remarkable conciliatory stance on the Soviet Union was ultimately the tangible threat of another world war. If achieving a durable peace meant granting concessions to or “appeasing” a ruthless regime, so be it. In a war-ravaged world, order must come first. This was the message that Niebuhr had been spreading all along. But the question is, as the specter of another world conflict loomed large, what kind of concrete policy should the West adopt in order to stave off a showdown with Communist Russia?

The answer Niebuhr provided, as the title of one *Christianity and Crisis* editorial aptly summed up, was one of “Positive Defense”.<sup>108</sup> A touchstone of Niebuhr’s political realism, the policy of positive defense meant, while the West should stand firmly against Russia on certain strategic issues, it should put more effort into rebuilding the economic life of Europe so that the continent could be strong enough to resist the totalitarian

---

<sup>106</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Russian Enigma”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Winter 1945), P. 6.

<sup>107</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Editorial Notes”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 5, No.20 (November 26, 1945. P. 2.

<sup>108</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Positive Defense”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 6, No. 7. (April 29, 1946), P. 1.

alternative to its ills.<sup>109</sup> Such a policy in effect meant that the West should engage in a peaceful competition with the Soviet Union so that each side could try to win the hearts of the European people by showcasing the strengths of their respective political and economic system.

Though the term “positive defense” was not used by Niebuhr until the war came to an end, he had already outlined such a policy during the war period. As mentioned, Niebuhr had long been emphasizing that the issue of the reconstruction of Europe lay at the heart of any potential conflicts between Russia and the West. Thus shortly before the war ended, he counseled that “we would have to meet Russia with more creative economic programs on the continent if we wanted to prevent the whole of Europe from falling into Russian hands.”<sup>110</sup> When relations between the great powers continued to deteriorate in the wake of the war, and it seemed clear to him that “the world was stumbling to disaster,” Niebuhr expounded the benefits of positive defense policy with much more urgency and more concrete solutions.<sup>111</sup>

Observing the international situation in 1946, he wrote, “The best chance of avoiding war still lies in neither strategic retreat nor in strategic challenge. It lies in the ability of the western world to organize the economic and political life of the vast continental realms.”<sup>112</sup> As the European continent was mired in vast economic and political chaos, while it was in the interest of democratic justice for the Western powers to establish

---

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Russia and the West”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Summer 1945), P. 6.

<sup>111</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Editorial Notes”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 6, No. 7 (May 27, 1946). P. 2.

<sup>112</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The International Situation”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1946, P. 3.

democracy on the continent, Niebuhr observed, “the economic situation is more important than the political one.”<sup>113</sup> Therefore, “our best policy would be to give Europe the chance for a healthy economic life.”<sup>114</sup> Although as he acknowledged, it was not possible to spell out every detail of a positive economic policy for Western Europe, Niebuhr still gave suggestions with regard to how such a policy could be applied to specific countries. For example, in the case of France, he wrote, “our economic policy must be generous economic aid to the nation by way of loans but also resistance to the French policy of acquisition of the Ruhr.”<sup>115</sup> With regard to Germany, besides economic aids, “what is needed is the revival of industry and trade in the West by linking Germany to the economy of the whole of western Europe.”<sup>116</sup>

This policy of positive defense, it can be easily observed, bore remarkable resemblance to the Europe reconstruction plan that the American government officially unveiled one year later, namely, the Marshall Plan. Niebuhr himself was indeed a staunch supporter of this pragmatic plan. Thus shortly after Secretary of State George Marshall delivered his famous speech at Harvard University, highlighting the need for a creative initiative for Europe’s recovery, Niebuhr wrote that “perhaps Secretary Marshall’s Harvard address and his suggestion for an economically united Europe may prove to be a new beginning.”<sup>117</sup> One month later, as Europe responded to this recovery plan with enthusiasm, while regretting the Soviet Union’s withdrawal from the plan, he

---

<sup>113</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Positive Defense”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 6, No. 7 (April 29, 1946), P. 1.

<sup>114</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Russian and American Race”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Spring 1946), P. 6.

<sup>115</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Positive Defense”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 6, No. 7 (April 29, 1946), P. 1.

<sup>116</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Mr. Wallace’s Errors”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 6, No. 18 (October 28, 1946). P. 1.

<sup>117</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Editorial Notes”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol.7, No. 12 (July 7, 1947). P. 2.

nevertheless hailed the Marshall Plan as “a kind of turning point in postwar history.”<sup>118</sup> When isolationists in America challenged the wisdom of the plan, Niebuhr threw his weight behind the plan and spelt out what was at stake in an editorial entitled “The Marshall Plan.” Apart from stressing that the spread of economic chaos and political totalitarianism on the continent could not be stemmed if America did not come to its aid, he also pointed out the pragmatic side of this plan for America itself. “Our aid need not,” he observed candidly, “be prompted purely by either humanitarian concern for the starving or by concern for the preservation of political liberty in Europe...We must furnish aid also in the interest of our own economic health.”<sup>119</sup> After all, he explained, exporting multiple-billion dollars worth of goods in excess of importing meant lots of jobs would be created in America. These exports were also a guarantee against deflation in the American economy. It was obvious that the economic recovery of Europe would ultimately benefit America by providing it a huge overseas market. Therefore, he concluded, “It is because motives of national self-interest converge upon motives of generosity, that we have a right to hope that the Marshall Plan will be accepted, no matter how the isolationists may rage.”<sup>120</sup>

Given the rising anti-communist hysteria in the West that was prompted by the Soviet Union’s encroachment upon Europe, especially in religious circles, one cannot help but marvel at the far-sightedness and soberness of Niebuhr’s insights. In a way, the policy of positive defense was a perfect embodiment of the kind of “great skill, forbearance and

---

<sup>118</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Editorial Notes”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 7, No. 14 (August 4, 1947). P. 2.

<sup>119</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Marshall Plan”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 7, No. 13 (October 13, 1947). P.2.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

wisdom,”<sup>121</sup> or “watchfulness and soberness” that he believed were required for the task of seeking peace with Russia on the West’s part.<sup>122</sup> It also signaled that Niebuhr’s realistic approach to politics had come to maturity. Essentially a mean between strategic retreat and strategic challenge, positive defense echoed the American government’s policy of “patience and firmness” in dealing with the Soviet Union at the time, but went beyond that. In the face of tense relations between the Soviet Union and the West, it called for a creative economic initiative as the way of defending the democratic values of the West, rather than confronting the Russians with military might. Pure military power could never fend off the spread of communism on the continent, rather, it would only aggravate the already tense situation. Resuscitating Europe’s economy was in a sense an offensive on the economic front. Such a positive offensive was the best defense of the democratic systems on the continent.

At the end of this chapter, it is worth stressing that this positive defense policy toward the Soviet Union, like many other of Niebuhr’s political views on the war, was expressed in the nation’s influential Christian journals. The fact that, as a Christian thinker, Niebuhr was so attentive to contemporary political problems epitomized the great importance he attached to the relation between Christianity and power politics. As pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, the title of the book Niebuhr brought out in 1940, *Christianity and Power Politics*, mirrored Niebuhr’s major concern during the war. Niebuhr’s engagement with the Soviet Union throughout the war period, be it declaring an end to illusions about the Russian experiment, or calling on the West to forge a partnership with

---

<sup>121</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The World Situation”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 11, No. 4, (Fall 1946), P. 3.

<sup>122</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Our Chances for Peace”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (February 17, 1947), P. 2.

Russia in war and peace, or advocating a policy of positive defense toward Russia, all exemplified how Niebuhr as a Christian theologian had mastered the art of power politics.

Realism, commenting on St. Augustine's political realism, Niebuhr once wrote, "denotes the disposition to take all factors in a social and political situation, which offer resistance to established norms, into account, particularly the factors of self-interest and power..."<sup>123</sup> Viewed through the prism of this political realism, it is no wonder that for Niebuhr, the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact was very "logical" from the standpoint of power politics. Because, as he reasoned, if one dealt with politics realistically, one can easily discover that in every national organism there was "a primal instinct of survival." Equally unsurprising was the fact that after discarding his illusions about the Russian experiment, he would vigorously champion a comradeship in war with a ruthless regime. It was in the West's own interest to help Russia defeat the Nazis, he once pointed out candidly. As to advocating a partnership with Russia after the war and a policy of positive defense, the kind of realistic calculation was not hard to identify either. For the sake of international peace, it was acceptable to "appease" Russia at the expense of the interests of some small nations. Helping Europe get back on its feet economically could not only avoid a military confrontation with Russia on the continent, but also benefit America's own economy.

---

<sup>123</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Augustine's Political Realism", in *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), P. 119.

## Conclusion

When Reinhold Niebuhr embarked on his journey to the Soviet Union to witness “the most thrilling venture in modern history” in 1930, he had little doubt that capitalism and Western democracy were entering an age of darkness, if not nearing total collapse. The light of hope, it seemed to him, lay in socialism, the synonym for justice and equality in the eyes of many at the time. In the ensuing fifteen years Niebuhr’s world was turned upside down. “Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”<sup>1</sup> He concluded as such in his book *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944), in which he described democracy as the child of light and communism as the offspring of darkness respectively.

It is generally agreed among scholars that by the time he brought out this book, Niebuhr had already worked out most themes of his mature thought. Sin, an uncomfortable and even offensive concept to the modern mind, nevertheless regained currency after his publication of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Christian realism, a political ethic that established a dialectic relationship between love and justice, already attracted a wide array of religious as well as atheist followers. The fact that *TIME* magazine in 1948 featured him in the cover story of its twenty-fifth issue was a testimony to Niebuhr’s stature as America’s most influential religious and social thinker.

---

<sup>1</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944), xiii. This quote is perhaps Niebuhr’s most famous aphorism.

So how did Niebuhr, over a time span of some fifteen years, grow from a socialist radical into a famous Christian realist? Heeding his confession that the unfolding of his theological thoughts came primarily as a result of the “pressure of world events,” this thesis chooses to study Niebuhr’s engagement with the Soviet Union as a way to shed some light on this complicated question.

The findings, in short, are that the Soviet Union indeed occupied a very special position in the development of Niebuhr’s thought, and his engagement with this country from 1930 to 1945 played a decisive role in the formation of his political and theological realism. This was embodied in the following aspects. First, Niebuhr’s engagement with the communist religion resulted in his rejection of the liberal interpretation of religion and greatly expanded his understanding of the nature of religious faith itself. Second, coming to grips with the communist religion also drove Niebuhr to see more clearly the impotency of Western Christianity with regard to the problem of justice. The launch of *Radical Religion* in the mid-1930s represented Niebuhr’s concrete effort in revitalizing Christianity so that Christians could rise up to the challenges of contemporary political and social problems. Third, his “flirtation” with Marxism not only led him to “rediscover” sin, the linchpin of Christian realism, but also contributed to the emergence of the key category, namely, myth and meaning in his theology. Lastly, Niebuhr’s realistic approach to international power politics, culminating in the “positive defense” policy regarding the reconstruction of Europe during the period under examination, was a direct result of his engagement with the Soviet Union.

When he wrote his first book *Does Civilization Need Religion?* in 1927, religion – largely identical with Christianity in this book – in Niebuhr’s view, was “the champion of personality in a seemingly impersonal world.” The underlying theme of that little book was essentially the tenets of “Social Gospel” – the Kingdom of God could be realized on earth as long as the Christian ethic and the commandment of love were preached adequately. Christian ethics were deemed directly applicable to social and political problems. In a word, up until the Great Depression, Niebuhr accepted the Christian faith as tantamount to “the liberal and highly moralistic creed.”<sup>2</sup>

As he recollected in “A Third of a Century at Union Seminary,” the Great Depression “drove many perilously near to or into Stalinist Marxism.”<sup>3</sup> Amid the Depression, as one of those many on the left who were drawn to “Stalinist Marxism,” Niebuhr jumped on the bandwagon of touring the “Land of Promise” to witness the Great Experiment unfolding. If the Great Depression had already laid bare the utopianism of liberal Christianity, then Niebuhr’s encounter with the ongoing First Five Year Plan further revealed to him the inadequacies of Christianity, not least its failure in acting as a driving force of social enterprise. The sharp contrast between the stagnation at home and the vitality of Russian society brought home to him that something religious was at work in the Russian experiment. Every nation needed a religion and religion was perhaps more of “a devotion to a cause which goes beyond the warrant of pure rationality,” he came to believe. Caught up in what he described as “one of the greatest ventures in human

---

<sup>2</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Intellectual Biography”, in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, edited by Charles Kegley and Robert Bretall, P. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “A Third of a Century at Union Seminary”, P. 3.

history,” Niebuhr realized that the idea that religion was a champion of personality, or a sense of awe before the infinity could not be more inadequate and sentimental.

Although he initially identified “the machine,” or “industrialization” as the God of the atheist nation, shortly after that trip, Niebuhr drew the conclusion that communism itself was the true religion of the Russian people. The reason why the Five Year Plan sparked so much enthusiasm among the Russian people, Niebuhr believed, was because the social objective of communism, namely, the establishment of a just and equal society, in effect bore the Russian people’s trust in the meaningfulness of life. The belief that history was on the proletariat’s side and a perfect society on earth was within reach constituted a powerful religious faith for the Russian mass. This fervent faith not only explained why the Five Year Plan was carried out with so much vigor, but also provided an answer as to why the Russian people were willing to make so great sacrifices and endure unimaginable hardships for the communist cause. Impressed, yet at the same time unsettled by the immense power of this communist belief, shortly after this trip, Niebuhr concluded in the article “The Problem of Communist Religion” that religion was essentially the act of faith by which life is endowed with meaning or by which the meaning of life is apprehended.

Faith as a trust in the meaningfulness of life was to become Niebuhr’s definitive view on the nature of religious faith. Just a few years before his death, commenting on the vitality of religion in modern society, he observed that religious faith was an expression of trust in the meaning of human existence. I believe it is unmistakable that Niebuhr’s encounter

with the communist religion not only prompted him to shake off his old liberalistic interpretation of religion, but also led him to seek a wider and deeper understanding of the nature of religious faith.

Marked by the publications of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* and *Reflections on the End of an Era*, Niebuhr's attachment to Marxism grew steadily in the first half of the 1930s. Part of the reason was, as the Depression spread, communism's catastrophic and apocalyptic view of history struck a chord with him. Combining optimism and pessimistic determinism, communism, Niebuhr believed, represented an attempt to "snatch victory out of defeat in the style of great drama and classical religion."<sup>4</sup> For all its shortcomings, he was convinced that communism's apocalyptic view was a powerful incentive to social action. A powerful incentive to social action, needless to say, was what the moribund Western society sorely needed. Therefore, utopian as the communist religion was, its espousal of justice and equality, it seemed to Niebuhr, nevertheless made it a far more realistic, hence superior political strategy.

It was with this conviction that Niebuhr lashed out at Christianity for its failure in addressing the problem of justice in the mid-1930s. In Niebuhr's view, with sacrificial love as its highest moral ideal, Christianity faced inherent difficulties in dealing with political problems where conflict and coercion were part and parcel of the realities. With regard to Christian orthodoxy, although it regarded the law of love as non-applicable to the world of politics, by drawing a rigid line between the realm of politics and ethics, it in fact lost an effective source of criticism for the political and economic injustices. In

---

<sup>4</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, P. 154.

reality, Orthodox Christianity had always been wedded to entrenched interests of a society by its endorsement of the status quo. While Christian orthodoxy erred in excluding the law of love from political and economic life, liberal Christianity went to the other extreme. With a firm belief in the goodness of man, liberal Christianity taught that the law of love was directly applicable to social and political problems. In other words, as long as the commandment of love was preached adequately enough, went the liberal teachings, all social ills of modern society could be cured. But the brutal facts of history had proven this kind of sentimental teaching dead wrong. Lastly, Christian Asceticism, a rebellion from Orthodox Christianity in nature, was essentially a withdrawal from political relations because it sought exclusively for perfection in morality. In a word, Christian dogmas of all shades, in Niebuhr's eyes, failed to come to grips with the fundamental political problem, namely, the problem of justice.

A viable Christian political ethic which could maintain a dialectic relation between love and justice was therefore urgently needed. How could such an ethic be fostered? The solution, Niebuhr suggested in "Christian Politics and Communist Religion," was to establish a political ethic "which will borrow from, and affirm, the validity of many the basic tenets of Marxian politics."<sup>5</sup> The launch of *Radical Religion* in 1935 marked Niebuhr's concrete effort in building such a vital religion. Though short-lived, this journal, carrying Niebuhr's comments on events related to the Soviet Union in practically every one of its issues, became pretty much his personal megaphone on both political and theological issues, until he declared an end to illusions after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact.

---

<sup>5</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Christian Politics and Communist Religion", P. 471.

The significance of the category of myth and meaning in Niebuhr's theology was generally acknowledged by Niebuhr's followers and critics alike. But how did Niebuhr develop this central category? This research has shown that Niebuhr famous slogan "Politically to the left and theologically to the right" provided a critical clue to this, that is, there was a subtle correlation between his politically leftward move and theologically rightward swing. Specifically, Niebuhr's interpretation of communism's character as religious myth played an important role in guiding him to seek a more profound understanding of the truth in religious myth.

By the mid-1930s, "meaning" had become a key term in Niebuhr's interpretation of religion. Religious faith, to Niebuhr, as vividly illustrated by the communist religion, was essentially the bearer of a trust in the meaningfulness of existence. As "meaning can be attributed to history only by a mythology," he argued that "communism was a religion in as far as it had a mythology which insisted that human life and history had meaning."<sup>6</sup> Obviously, as his engagement with communism deepened, Niebuhr came to believe that communism's confident faith that good will grow out of disaster, or salvation through catastrophe was essentially a mythology through which its followers' lives were endowed with meaning. But this Marxian mythology had one chief defect, namely, it denied the existence of God. Because in Niebuhr's view, an adequate mythology never failed to commit the rational absurdity of conceiving God as at once the pinnacle and basis of reality.

---

<sup>6</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era*, P. 193.

It was the challenge from this powerful communist mythology, or in other words, the need to find an adequate mythology that eventually led him to re-interpret the meaning of the Biblical myths. Religion was poetry which sought to grasp the essence of reality mythically. Biblical myths, such as the Creation, the Cross, the Second Coming, etc., were all pointers of the characters of the eternal. To the dismay of Christian traditionalists, Niebuhr declared that only with the help of these “symbols”, can the finite mind penetrate the mystery of existence.

Niebuhr’s politically leftward move also contributed to his “rediscovery” of sin. Niebuhr himself made it clear in the inaugural issue of *Radical Religion* that Marxism provided a valuable insight in which lay the heart of prophetic religion and which Marxism had rediscovered. This was the insight that man’s achievements were never absolute, that they were colored and conditioned by human finiteness and corrupted by sin. It is abundantly clear, therefore, that Niebuhr did not dust off the dogma of sin because of his fondness for religious orthodoxy. Rather, it was through his engagement with communism that he appropriated the “valuable insight” that Marxism had “rediscovered”.

However, Niebuhr did not simply borrow this valuable insight from Marxism. One of the pathetic aspects of the Marxian religion, he came to realize, was that its interpretation of history allowed it to see the relativity and imperfection of the cultural values and pretensions of all other classes and groups, but the characteristic social attitudes and political objectives of the proletariat were made absolute and transcendent. The self-righteousness and alleged disinterestedness embodied in the Marxist dogma itself,

coupled with the gradually revealed brutalities of the Soviet regime in reality, drove Niebuhr to realize acutely the universality of sin in human enterprise. The Moscow Trials, demonstrating the danger of the abuse of power by the proletarian class, which was supposed to be free of vengeance, further reinforced Niebuhr's concerns about the obstinacy of sin in history. Thus not long after the Moscow Trials, as war clouds hovered over Europe, Niebuhr would choose to use "sin" as the major theme of his first Gifford Lecture – *Man's Nature*.

Starting from the early 1930s, Niebuhr had maintained that the problem of politics and economics was mainly the problem of justice. Moreover, the establishment of justice inevitably involved conflict and coercion. A realistic Christian political ethic, therefore, must recognize the necessity of the use of power in seeking justice. The problem of the abuse of power by the new ruling class in a new society had not yet fully grabbed his attention.

As the magnitude of the so-called liquidation of class enemies by the Soviet regime became known to the Western world, Niebuhr realized that even the formerly dispossessed and exploited were prone to political tyranny once they assumed unchecked power. Power was always a source of corruption. This was further rammed home to Niebuhr by the Moscow Trials. Seeing the growth of political tyranny in the Soviet Union as "the premature death of an infant," after the Trials, Niebuhr drew the conclusion that radicalism had to learn the lesson that the destruction of democratic checks upon the power of the state must not be regarded with complacency. Clearly, the Moscow Trials

not only forced upon Niebuhr the danger of the misuse of power by the proletariat, but also convinced him that democracy in politics was a perennial necessity.

While the Moscow Trials did not completely dash Niebuhr's hopes in the Russian experiment, the Nazi-Soviet Pact came as a final straw. The fact that a socialist country which pretended to be the champion of a proletarian civilization made an abrupt U-turn and struck a deal with its foremost foe, in Niebuhr's view, underscored the fundamental role of self-interest in power politics. It also spoke volumes about the pretense and ideology in world power politics. That a socialist society was not free of pretense and ideology also proved that the Marxist theory of ideology was wrong. Thus at the end of the 1930s, Niebuhr came to the conclusion that the building of a new society could not count on much help from the Russian experiment after all.

As a sign of his determination to do away with his illusions about a new socialist society where justice and equality would prevail, Niebuhr resigned from the Socialist Party and folded the radical journal *Radical Religion* not long after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact. But this did not mean Niebuhr would turn into a fierce anti-communist like many on the left did. On the contrary, throughout the war period, Niebuhr spared no effort in prodding the Western governments to form a durable partnership with communist Russia during war and peace. His remarkably conciliatory attitude toward the communist country was a perfect reflection of the kind of political realism that he had been advocating since the mid-1930s. For the West, in his view, forging a comradeship with Russia during the war was ultimately in its own interest, because whether Western

liberties could be preserved very much depended on Russia's victory over the Nazis. For the sake of such a partnership, some sacrifices had to be made. Niebuhr had little qualms in supporting Russia's territorial claims over the Baltic states and Poland in 1941. The interests of those victims, to him, were a price worth paying in order to draw Russia into an alliance against the Nazis.

Niebuhr's political realism came to fruition at the end of the Second World War. Even when the war was raging, he already set his eyes on the problem of post-war world order. Another world conflict had to be avoided at all cost, even if this meant "appeasement" of Russia and the sacrifice of the national interests of some small nations. Justice was the ultimate goal in international politics. But for a war-ravaged world, order must come first. The best policy for America in dealing with a recalcitrant Russia, which seemed intent on encroachment on the European continent as the war drew to an end, was neither confrontation nor retreat. Rather, it should be a policy of "positive defense." A touchstone of Niebuhr's political realism, the policy of positive defense argued that while the West should exhibit its firmness on certain strategic issues, it should on the other hand exercise patience and put more effort into rebuilding the economic life of Europe. Such a policy, furthermore, as he later commented on the Marshall Plan, was also in America's interest in that it would not only help create jobs but also open the European market to American goods.

Reinhold Niebuhr did not formulate his realistic theology through meditating on the nature and destiny of man in the ivory tower. "The philosophers have only interpreted

the world, in various ways; the point is to change it,” Karl Marx once said.<sup>7</sup> With a strong courage to change things that should be changed, as a political philosopher and theologian, Niebuhr not only interpreted the world in relation to the idea of God, but also tried to change the world.<sup>8</sup> Driven by his unwavering passion for social justice, and more importantly, his desire to relate Christian insights to social and political problems of the tumultuous twentieth century, Niebuhr never stopped striving for a better world in his lifetime.

In retrospect, given his sensitivity to human misery and his passion for justice, it was only natural that amid the Great Depression, Niebuhr would grow attracted to Marxism. It was equally logical that the Soviet Union, with the evil underbelly of communism still concealed, became a kind of “land of promise” to radicals like Niebuhr in the early 1930s. While most commentators acknowledge the fact that Marxism was one of the chief trends of thought that formed Niebuhr’s mind, no previous study has paid special attention to how Niebuhr, fundamentally a pragmatist, dealt with the application of Marxism.<sup>9</sup> It is hoped that this study of Niebuhr’s engagement with the Soviet Union has successfully revealed the impact that this communist country had on the formation of his thought. Only with a proper knowledge of this impact, can one truly understand Niebuhr’s mature thought, especially his stance on communism in the Cold War years. Without realizing the links between Niebuhr’s realism and his deep engagement with the

---

<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx, “Theses On Feuerbach”, *Marx/Engels Selected Works* (Moscow: Progressive Publishers, 1969), Vol. 1, P 15. Online archive: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Part of Niebuhr’s famous serenity prayer goes like: “God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.”

<sup>9</sup> The other two are orthodox Christianity and liberalism. See John Bennett, review of *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, *The Journal of Religion*, Volume 16, No. 2 (April, 1936), P.212.

Soviet Union, it is easy to take his strong criticisms of communism at face value, hence the misnomer of “Cold Warrior”. The fact is, Niebuhr was never a fervent anti-communist. His harsh attitudes towards communism in the Cold War period were not a departure from, but a continuation of his principled criticisms of the Soviet regime that were based on his realistic analysis of human nature and human destiny.

Meanwhile, at the end of this study, it is worth noting that the choice of studying the period of 1930 to 1945 by no means implies that Niebuhr’s interests in the Soviet Union subsided in the Cold War era. On the contrary, with the whole world living in the shadow of nuclear Armageddon between America and the Soviet Union, Niebuhr continued to pay close attention to developments in the communist country and spared no effort in advocating “peaceful coexistence” between the two rivals.<sup>10</sup> “Democracy has a more compelling justification and requires a more realistic vindication than is given it by the liberal culture with which it has been associated in modern history”, Niebuhr observed in the pages of *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* in 1944.<sup>11</sup> In a sense, this perfectly indicated the direction of Niebuhr’s career in the following Cold War years, that is, a tireless, realistic vindication of democracy.

---

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Case for Coexistence”, *The New Leader* (October 4, 1954). “Co-existence or Total War”, *Christian Century*, Vol. 71, No. 33 (August 18, 1954). “Coexistence Under a Nuclear Stalemate”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 19, No.15 (September 21, 1959). “The Long Ordeal of Co-existence”, *The New Republic*, Vol. 140, No. 13 (March 30, 1959). “The Long Haul of Co-existence”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 19, No. 20 (November 30), 1959.

<sup>11</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944), xii.

## Select Bibliography

### Archives

The Reinhold Niebuhr Papers, the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

### Books by Reinhold Niebuhr

*Does Civilization Need Religion: A study in the Social Resources and Limitations of Religion in Modern Life* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927).

*Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Colby, 1929).

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

*Reflections on the End of an Era* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934).

*An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935).

*Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937).

*Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940).

*The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*. Vol. 1, *Human Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1941). Vol. 2, *Human Destiny* (New York: Charles Scriber's 1943).

*The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944).

*Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermons for Today and Tomorrow* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946).

*Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949).

*Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953).

*The Self and the Dramas of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955).

*The Structure of Nations and Empires: A study of Recurring Patterns and Problems of the Political Order in Relation to the Unique Problems of the Nuclear Age* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959).

### Articles, Editorials, Essays, and Reviews by Reinhold Niebuhr, cited or consulted in this dissertation

"Allegorizing the Miracles", *Christian Century*, Vol. 44. No. 41 (October, 13, 1927).

- “Morality and the Supernatural”, *Christian Century*, Vol. 45, No. 36 (September 6, 1928).
- “Idealism and Religion”, *Christian Century*, Vol.45, No. 35 (September 13, 1928).
- “The Terrible Beauty of the Cross”, *Christian Century*, Vol. 46, No. 12 (March 21, 1929).
- “Jesus as Symbol”, *The New York Herald Tribune Books* (September 22, 1929).
- “Russia Makes the Machine Its God”, *Christian Century*, Vol. 47, No. 36 (September 10, 1930).
- “Russia’s Tractor Revolution”, *Christian Century*, Vol.47, No. 37 (September 17, 1930).
- “Church in Russia”, *Christian Century*, Vol. 47, No. 38 (September 24, 1930).
- “Russian Efficiency”, *Christian Century*, Vol. 47, No. 40 (October 1, 1930).
- “Land of Extremes”, *Christian Century*, Vol. 47, No. 42 (October 15, 1930).
- “The Religion of Communism”, *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 147, No. 4 (April, 1931).
- “Religion in a Power Age”, *World Tomorrow*, Vol. 14, No. 5 (May, 1931).
- “The Life of Lenin”, *World Tomorrow*, Vol. 14, No. 8 (August, 1931).
- “Socialism and Christianity”, *Christian Century*, Vol. 48, No. 33 (August 19, 1931).
- “Radicalism and Religion”, *World Tomorrow*, Vol. 14, No. 10 (October, 1931).
- “Making Peace with Russia”, *World Tomorrow*, Vol. 14, No. 11 (November 1931).
- “Must We Do Nothing”, *Christian Century*, Vol. 49, No. 16 (March 30, 1932).
- “Epic of Russia”, *World Tomorrow*, Vol. 15, No. 6 (June, 1932).
- “Events and the Man”, *World Tomorrow*, Vol. 15, No. 7 (July, 1932).
- “Waldo Frank in Russia”, *World Tomorrow*, Vol. 15, No. 9 (September, 1932).
- “A Communist Manifesto”, *World Tomorrow*, Vol. 15, No. 15 (October, 1932).
- “More Pro and Con on Russia”, *World Tomorrow*, Vol. 15, No. 16 (November 2, 1932).
- “The Revolt of the Masses”, *World Tomorrow*, Vol. 15, No. 18 (November 16, 1932)
- “Trotsky’s Classic”, *World Tomorrow*, Vol.16, No. 5 (February 1, 1933).
- “After Capitalism—What”, *World Tomorrow*, Vol. 16, No. 20 (March 1, 1933).
- “Marxism and Religion”, *World Tomorrow*, Vol. 16, No. 11 (March 15, 1933).
- “Democracy in Crisis”, *World Tomorrow*, Vol. 16, No. 17 (May, 1933).
- “Ablest Interpreter of Marx”, *World Tomorrow*, Vol. 16, No. 20(August, 1933).
- “Making Radicalism Effective”, *World Tomorrow*, Vol. 16, No. 29 (December 21, 1933).
- “Class War and Class Hatred”, *World Tomorrow*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (January 4, 1934).
- “The Fellowship of Socialist Christians”, *World Tomorrow*, Vol. 17, No. 12 (June 14, 1934).
- “The Problem of the Communist Religion”, *World Tomorrow*, Vol. 17, No. 15 (July 26, 1934).

“A Footnote on Religion”, *The Nation*, Vol. 139, No. 3612 (September 26, 1934).

“Mr. Laski Proceeds”, *The Nation*, Vol. 140, No. 3637 (March 20, 1935).

“Radical Religion”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Autumn, 1935).

“Is Religion Counter-Revolutionary?”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Autumn, 1935).

“Communism in Russia”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring, 1936).

“God and Piece Work”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring, 1936).

“Hitler and Buchman”, *Christian Century*, Vol. 53, No. 41 (October 7, 1936).

“Christianity and Communism”, *The Spectator*, Vol. 157, No. 5654 (November 6, 1936)

“Christian Radicalism”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 2, No. 1, (Winter, 1936).

“The Conflict in the Socialist Party”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Winter, 1936).

“Fascism, Communism, Christianity”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Winter, 1936).

“The United Front”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (Winter, 1936).

“The Interpretation of History”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Winter, 1936).

“The Meaning of History”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Winter, 1936).

“Catholicism and Communism” *Radical Religion*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Winter, 1936).

“Religion and Communism”, *Modern Monthly*, Vol. 8, No. 12 (February, 1937).

“The Moscow Trials”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Spring, 1937).

“The Russian Revolution Betrayed”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Summer, 1937).

“The Russian Mystery”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Autumn, 1937).

“The International Situation”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Winter, 1937).

“Disillusionment”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Winter, 1937).

“The Revised Communist Faith”, *The Nation*, Vol. 146, No. 9 (February 26, 1938).

“The Creed of Modern Christian Socialists”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Spring, 1938).

“The Origin of Russian Communism”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Spring, 1938).

“Roosevelt’s Merry-Go-Round”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Spring, 1938).

“Russia and Karl Marx”, *The Nation*, Vol. 146, No. 19 (May 7, 1938).

“Trials on Trial”, *The Nation*, Vol. 147, No. 5 (July 30, 1938).

“The Red Army Purge”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Summer, 1938).

“Russia and Japan”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Summer, 1938).

“Traitors on Trial: A Verbatim Report of the Moscow Trials”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Summer 1938).

“Christian Socialism”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Fall, 1938).

“After Munich”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Winter, 1938).

“Brief Comments”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Winter, 1938).

“The Peril of Western Democracies”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Winter, 1938).

“The Socialist Party”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Winter, 1938).

“Peace and the Liberal Illusion”, *The Nation*, Vol. 148, No. 5 (January 28, 1939).  
 “Ten Years Shook My World”, *Christian Century*, Vol. 56, No. 17 (April 26, 1939).  
 “A Cry from Czechoslovakia”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Spring, 1939).  
 “Communists and the United Front”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Summer, 1939).  
 “The International Situation”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Summer, 1939).  
 “The Hitler-Stalin Pact”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Fall, 1939).  
 “Notes on the World Crisis”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 4, (Fall, 1939).  
 “Ideology and Pretense”, *The Nation*, Vol. 149, No. 24 (December 9, 1939).  
 “A Reply to Professor Macintosh”, *The Review of Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (March, 1940).  
 “Sin in Politics”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Spring, 1940).  
 “The Issue of a Just Peace”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Spring, 1940).  
 “Marxists Are Taking Stock”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Spring, 1940).  
 “Politics and the Christian Ethic”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Spring, 1940).  
 “I Have Seen God Do It”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Summer, 1940).  
 “An End to Illusions”, *The Nation*, Vol. 150, No. 26 (June 29, 1940).  
 “Christianity and the World Crisis”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Fall, 1940).  
 “Defending Democracy”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Fall, 1940).  
 “The International Situation”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Fall, 1940).  
 “Russia and France”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Fall, 1940).  
 “Fellow Travelers”, *Radical Religion*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Winter, 1940).  
 “The Christian Faith and the World Crisis”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol.1, No. 1 (February 10, 1941).  
 “The Lend-Lease Bill”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol.1, No.1 (February 10, 1941).  
 “The World After the War”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol.1, No.1 (February 10, 1941).  
 “Holy Wars”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol.1, No.1 (February 10, 1941).  
 “Reflections on the World Situation”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (April 21, 1941).  
 “The Russian Venture”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 1, No. 11 (June 30, 1941).  
 “New Allies, Old Issues”, *The Nation*, Vol. 153, No. 3 (July 19, 1941).  
 “The Story of A False Religion”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Summer, 1941).  
 “The Red Thirties”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Fall, 1941).  
 “The Russians and Our Interdependence”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 1, No. 15 (August 25, 1941).  
 “The Russian Situation”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 1, No. 19 (November 3,

- 1941).
- “Russia’s Partnership in War and Peace”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol.2, No. 2 (February 23, 1942).
- “Russia and the Peace”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Spring, 1942).
- “The Anglo-Russian Pact”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 2, No. 11 (June 29, 1942).
- “Russia and the Western World”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Summer, 1942).
- “Thoughts on ‘World War III?’”, *The Nation*, Vol. 155, No. 2 (July 11, 1942).
- “Notes on the World Conflict”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Autumn, 1942).
- “Russia and the West, part I”, *The Nation*, Vol. 156, No. 3(January 16, 1943).
- “Russia and the West, part II”, *The Nation*, Vol.156, No. 4(January 16, 1943).
- “Russian and the Communist Party”, *The Nation*, Vol. 156, No. 15 (April 10, 1943).
- “Comments”, *The Nation*, Vol. 156, No. 15 (April 10, 1943).
- “The Perils of Our Foreign Policy”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Spring, 1943).
- “The Possibility of a Durable Peace”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Summer, 1943).
- “Marxism in Eclipse”, *The Spectator*, Vol. 170, No. 5997 (June 4, 1943).
- “From Wilson to Roosevelt”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Fall, 1943).
- “Power Politics and Justice”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Winter, 1943).
- “The Vatican and the Soviet Union”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 3, No. 18 (November 1, 1943).
- “Politics and the Children of Light”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 3, No. 20 (November 29, 1943).
- “World War III Ahead?”, *The Nation*, Vol. 158, No. 13 (March 25, 1944).
- “The Communist Party and Russia”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Spring, 1944).
- “My Life in Russia”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Summer 1944).
- “Slavery and Freedom”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Summer 1944).
- “The End of Total War”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Fall 1944).
- “Realistic Internationalism”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Fall 1944).
- “Editorial Notes”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 4, No. 16 (October 2, 1944).
- “Russia and the Post-War World”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Winter 1944).
- “Russia and Peace”, *Social Progress*, Vol. 35, No. 5 (January, 1945).
- “The Conference of the ‘ Big Three’”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (March 5, 1945).
- “The Outlines of Peace”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Spring, 1945).
- “Editorial Notes”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 5, No. 11 (June 25, 1945).

"Russia and the West", *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Summer, 1945).  
 "The San Francisco Conference", *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Summer 1945).  
 "The End of the War", *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Fall, 1945).  
 "The Atomic Bomb", *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Winter, 1945).  
 "The Atomic Issue", *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 5, No. 17 (October 15, 1945).  
 "The Russian Enigma", *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Winter, 1945).  
 "The Vengeance of Victors", *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 5, No. 20 (November 26, 1945).  
 "The Religious Level of the World Crisis", *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 5, No. 24 (January 21, 1946).  
 "The Russian Adventure", *The Nation*, Vol. 162, No. 8 (February 23, 1946).  
 "The Myth of World Government", *The Nation*, Vol. 162, No. 11 (March 16, 1946).  
 "Positive Defense", *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 6, No. 7 (April 29, 1946).  
 "Reinhold Insists", *The Nation*, Vol. 162, No. 16 (April 20, 1946).  
 "The Russian and American Race", *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Spring, 1946).  
 "The Russian Evolution", *The Nation*, Vol. 162, No. 20 (May 18, 1946).  
 "The International Situation", *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Summer, 1946).  
 "Europe, Russia and America", *The Nation*, Vol. 163, No. 11 (September 14, 1946).  
 "Mr. Wallace's Errors", *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 6, No. 18 (October 28, 1946).  
 "Our Chances for Peace", *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (February 17, 1947).  
 "Editorial Notes", *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 7, No. 9 (May 26, 1947).  
 "The Marshall Plan", *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 7, No. 17 (October 13, 1947).  
 "Two Forms of Tyranny", *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (February 2, 1948).  
 "One World or None", *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (February 16, 1948).  
 "The Battle of Berlin", *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Autumn 1948).  
 "Communism and Socialism in Europe", *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Winter, 1948).  
 "The Russian Idea", *Religion in Life*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Spring, 1949).  
 "To Moscow and Back", *The Nation*, Vol. 170, No. 4 (January 28, 1950).  
 "The Soviet Reality", *The Nation*, Vol. 171, No. 13 (September 23, 1950).  
 "The Long Cold War", *The Nation*, Vol. 171, No. 17 (October 21, 1950).  
 "Editorial Notes", *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 13, No. 7 (April 27, 1953).  
 "Change in Soviet Leadership", *The Lutheran*, Vol. 35, No. 34 (May 20, 1953).  
 "The Meaning of the Shift in Soviet Policy", *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Winter, 1953).  
 "Patience and the Cold War", *The Lutheran*, Vol. 36, No. 20 (February 17,

- 1954).
- “Is tyranny Changing in Russia”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Autumn, 1954).
- “Co-existence or Total War”, *Christian Century*, Vol. 71, No. 33 (August 18, 1954).
- “The Change in Russia”, *The New Leader*, Vol. 38, No. 39 (October 3, 1955).
- “Stalin – Deity or Demon”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 16, No. 6 (April 16, 1956).
- “The formidable Foe”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Spring, 1956).
- “Is This the Collapse of Tyranny”, *Christianity and Society*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Summer, 1956).
- “Nikita Khrushchev’s Meditation on Josef Stalin”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 16, No. 12 (July 9, 1956).
- “Changes in the Kremlin”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 17, No. 14 (August 5, 1957).
- “And Now There is One”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 17, No. 20 (November 25, 1957).
- “Why We Are Losing to the Russians”, *The New Leader*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (January 13, 1958).
- “After Sputnik and Explorer”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (March 17, 1958).
- “A Predicament We Share With Russia”, *The New Leader*, Vol. 41, No. 16 (April 21, 1958).
- “Mr. Khrushchev and Post-Stalin Russia”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (March 2, 1959).
- “The Long Ordeal of Co-existence”, *The New Republic*, Vol. 140, No. 13 (March 30, 1959).
- “A Khrushchev Visit to America”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 19, No. 14 (August 3, 1959).
- “Coexistence Under a Nuclear Stalemate”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 19, No. 15 (September 21, 1959).
- “Cold War and Nuclear Dilemma”, *The New Republic*, Vol. 141, No. 21 (November 23, 1959).
- “The Long Haul of Co-existence”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 19, No. 20 (November 30, 1959).
- “A Third of Century at Union”, *Union Seminary Tower*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (May 1960).
- “Khrushchev’s Rumanian Rhapsody”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 20, No. 12 (July 11, 1960).
- “Khrushchev and the United Nations”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 20, No. 18 (October 18, 1960).
- “The Gravity of Our Contest with Communism”, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 21, No. 13 (July 24, 1961).

## **Ethnologies of Reinhold Niebuhr's Papers, Address, Sermons, And Lectures**

*Faith and Politics: A Commentary on Religious, Social and Political Thought in a Technological Age* (New York: George Braziller, 1968). Edited with an introduction by Ronald H. Stone.

*The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Address* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986). Edited with an introduction by Robert McAfee Brown.

## **Selected Biographical and Introductory Works on Reinhold Niebuhr**

Bingham, June. *Courage to Change: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961).

Brown, Charles C. *Niebuhr and His Age* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992).

Chrystal, William G (ed). *Young Reinhold Niebuhr: His Early Writings, 1911-1931* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1977).

Durkin, Kenneth. *Reinhold Niebuhr* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing, 1989).

Fackre, Gabriel. *The Promise of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott Co.,1970).

Fox, Richard Wightman. *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon Books,1985).

Gaudin, Gary and Hall, Douglas John (ed.). *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Centenary Appraisal* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992).

Gilkey Langdon, *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).

Harland, Gordon. *The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960).

Kegley, Charles W., and Robert W. Bretall (eds.). *Reinhold Niebuhr, His Religious, Social and Political Thought* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956).

Landon, Harold R. (ed.). *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Prophetic Voice in Our Time* (Greenwich, CN: Seabury Press, 1962).

Lovin Robin W. *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Merkeley, Paul. *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Political Account* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975).

Naveh, Eyal. *Reinhold Niebuhr and Non-Utopian Liberalism: Beyond Illusion and Despair* (Brighton, England ; Portland, Or. : Sussex Academic Press, 2002).

Niebuhr, Ursula M. (ed.). *Remembering Reinhold Niebuhr: Letters of Reinhold and Ursula M. Niebuhr* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991).

Scott, Nathan A., Jr. (ed.). *The Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

Stone, Ronald H. *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr: a Mentor to the Twentieth Century* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

### **Selected Secondary Literature Cited**

- Balasubramanian, R. *The Personalistic Existentialism of Berdyaev* (Madras: University of Madras Press, 1970).
- Banks, Robert. "The Intellectual Encounter between Christianity and Marxism: A Contribution to the Pre-History of a Dialogue", *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 11, No. 23 (July 1976).
- Bennett, John. Review of *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (April 1936).
- Bennett, John. Review of *Beyond Tragedy*, *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (July 1938).
- Berdyaev, Nicholas. *The Origin of Russian Communism* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1960).
- Boyle, Peter G. *American-Soviet Relations: From the Russian Revolution to the Fall of Communism* (London: Routledge, 1993).
- Caute, David. *The Fellow-Travelers: Intellectual Friends of Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).
- Daniels, Robert (ed.). *A Documental History of Communism and the World: From Revolution to Collapse* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1984).
- Diggins, John Patrick. *The Rise and Fall of the American Left* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992).
- Duke, David Nelson. *Christianity and Marxism in the Life and Thought of Harry F. Ward* (PhD dissertation, Emory University, 1980).
- Eckardt, Hans Von. *Russia* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1932).
- Eddy, Sherwood. *Everybody's World* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1920).
- Eddy, Sherwood. *Sherwood Eddy, Russia Today: What Can We Learn From It?* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1934).
- Eddy, Sherwood. *Eighty Adventurous Years* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955).
- Emmons, Terence. "Russia Then and Now in the Pages of the American Historical Review and Elsewhere: A Few Centennial Notes", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 100, No. 4 (Oct., 1995).
- Engerman, David C. *Modernization from the Other Shore: American Intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).
- Feuer, Lewis S. "American Travelers to the Soviet Union 1917-1932: The Formation of a Component of New Deal Ideology", *American Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Part 1, Summer, 1962).
- Filene, Peter G. (ed.). *American Views of Soviet Russia, 1917-1965* (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press, 1968).

- Fox, Richard W. "Reinhold Niebuhr and the Emergence of the Liberal Realist Faith, 1930-1945," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (April 1976).
- Gill, Jill K. Book Review of *The Whole Gospel for the Whole World: Sherwood Eddy and the American Protestant Mission* (by Rick L. Nutt), *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 86, No. 3 (Dec., 1999).
- Gordon, King. "The Twilight of This Age," Review of *Reflections on the End of an Era, World Tomorrow*, Vol.17, No. 5 (March 1, 1934).
- Greenlaw, William A. "The Nature of Christian Truth: Another look at Reinhold Niebuhr and Mythology," *The Saint Luke's Journal of Theology*, Vol.19 (June, 1976).
- Hollander, Paul. *Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China and Cuba, 1928-1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).
- Hook, Sidney. *Out of Step: An Unquiet Life in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).
- James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002).
- Jaspers, Karl and Bultmann, Rudolf. *Myth and Christianity; An Inquiry into the Possibility of Religion without Myth* (New York: Noonday Press, 1958).
- Johnson, William Stacy (ed). H. Richard Niebuhr: *Theology, History, and Culture, Major Unpublished Writings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).
- Kegley, Charles W. and Bretall, Robert W. (ed). *The Theology of Paul Tillich* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961).
- Kleinman, Mark L. *A World of Hope, A World of Fear : Henry A. Wallace, Reinhold Niebuhr, and American Liberalism* (Columbus : Ohio State University Press, 2000).
- Krahn, Cornelius. "Russia: Messianism-Marxism", *Journal of Bible and Religion*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (July 1963).
- Kriesberg, Martin. "Soviet News in the New York Times", *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Winter, 1946-1947).
- Lasch, Christopher. *The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type* (New York: Knopf, 1965).
- Lasch, Christopher. *The Agony of the American Left* (New York: Knopf, 1969).
- Lewis, John, Rolanyi, Karl and Kitchin, D.K. (ed). *Christianity and the Social Revolution* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1935).
- Lyons, Eugene. *Worker's Paradise Lost: Fifty Years of Soviet Communism* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1967).
- Macintosh, Douglas Clyde. "Is Theology Reducible to Mythology?" *The Review of Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (January 1940).
- McCann, Dennis. "Reinhold Niebuhr and Jacques Maritain on Marxism: A Comparison of Two Traditional Models of Practical Theology", *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (April 1978).
- McCullough, Thomas E. "Reinhold Niebuhr and Karl Barth on the Relevance of Theology", *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (January 1963).
- Meyer, Donald B. *The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919-1941*

- (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1988).
- Mohrenschildt, Dimitri von. "The Early American Observers of the Russian Revolution, 1917-1921", *Russian Review*, Vol. 3, No.1 (Autumn, 1943).
- Mohrenschildt, Dimitri von. "American Intelligentsia and Russia of the N.E.P.", *Russian Review*, Vol.6, No.2 (Spring, 1947).
- Nutt, Rick L. *The Whole Gospel for the Whole World: Sherwood Eddy and the American Protestant Mission* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997).
- Nutt, Rick L. "G. Sherwood Eddy and the Attitudes of Protestants in the United States toward Global Mission", *Church History*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (September, 1997)
- Paper, L.M. Review of *Moral and Immoral Society*, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Apr, 1933).
- Pells, Richard H. *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s &1950s* (New York: Harper& Row, 1985).
- Purinton, Carl Everett. Review of *Reflections on the End of an Era*, *Journal of the National Association of Biblical Instructors*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1934).
- Rice, Daniel. *Reinhold Niebuhr and John Dewey: An American Odyssey* (Albany: State University of New York Press,1993).
- Ricoeur, Paul. "Christianity and the Meaning of History: Progress, Ambiguity, Hope", *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (October 1952).
- Robertson, D.B. *Reinhold Niebuhr's Works: A Bibliography* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983).
- Schlesinger Jr., Arthur. "Forgetting Reinhold Niebuhr", *The New York Times* (September 18, 2005).
- Schneider,Eugene V. "American Liberal-Intellectual Attitudes toward the Soviet Union", *Social Forces*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Mar., 1949).
- Service, Robert. *Lenin: A Biography* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000).
- Service, Robert. *Stalin: A Biography* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2005).
- Service, Robert. *A History of Modern Russia: From Nicholas II to Vladimir Putin* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005).
- Shannon, David A. *The Socialist Party of America: A History* (New York: Macmillan, 1955).
- Shapiro, Edward S. (ed). *Letters of Sidney Hook: Democracy, Communism and the Cold War* (Amonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1995).
- Shinn, Roger L. "Realism, Radicalism, and Eschatology in Reinhold Niebuhr: A Reassessment", *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (Oct 1974).
- Smith, T. V. Review of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Apr. 1933).
- Smith, Thomas W. *History and International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
- Stone, Ronald H. "An Interview with Reinhold Niebuhr," *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (March 17, 1969).
- Tillich, Paul. *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952).
- Trotsky, Leon. *The History of the Russian Revolution* (Ann Harbor: University of Michigan Press, 1932).

- Walsh, Warren B. "What the American People Think of Russia", *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol.8, No. 4 (Winter, 1944-1945).
- Wernham, James C.S. *Two Russian Thinkers: An Essay in Berdyaev and Shestov* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968).
- West, Charles. C. *Communism and the Theologians: Study of an Encounter* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958).
- Wieman, Henry Nelson Wieman. review of *The Origin of Russian Communism*, *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Oct. 1938).
- Z.A. Review of *Reflections on the End of an Era*, *International Affairs*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Mar-Apr. 1935).
- Zeldin, Mary-Barbara. "The Religious Nature of Russian Marxism", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol.8, No. 1 (Spring, 1969).
- "Faith for a Lenten Age," *TIME* magazine (Monday, March 08, 1948).
- "Death of a Christian Realist," *TIME* magazine (Monday, June 14, 1971).