

The Immoral Individual and the Even More Immoral Society : Reinhold Niebuhr's Notion of Christian Realism

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Introduction

The title of this paper is a play upon the title of Niebuhr's book of 1932, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. Niebuhr, the major North American Christian Protestant theologian of the first half of the 20th Century, himself commented that the title of the book was misleading and, perhaps, should have been entitled something like the title of this paper. The point he wanted to make was that individual behavior though tainted by religious sin can sometimes transcend itself and approach a good while it is group activity that is prone to excesses that individual actions cannot approach. Individuals have a conscience to which they can sometimes adhere ; groups and crowds do not have such a collective conscience.

Religious voices in the world today are advocating a social and religious revolution based upon certain religiously fundamentalist positions of absolute inerrancy and absolute moral righteousness. Nevertheless, there have been and still are less stringent voices that advocate a less self-righteous and more reflective position. It is a more humble and tentative advocacy of a self-reflective moral urgency that recognizes the imperfections of human intentions and activities but also recognizes the need to attempt to call humanity to see certain errors in our individual and collective activities and attempts to right these wrongs. In short, there are also religious voices that hope to actualize justice in society without the heat of self-righteousness and inerrancy. Niebuhr's voice was and is such a voice.

Religious traditions and their activities have been seen, rightfully, by many contemporary people as unnecessary, ill-conceived and dangerous. Indeed, it can be argued that exclusive, fundamentalist religious sentiments are behind many of the woes of our present-day, world-wide society. In the United States, a supposedly secular society, there is the call to have Christian prayers in public schools and to have the biblical account of the world's beginnings (creationism) taught together with Darwin's evolutionary theory, indeed, for some proponents, to prevent the

latter from being taught at all. Beyond intrusion into public education, there is a campaign to end the choice given to women to have control over their bodies and their lives by denying them the option of abortions. With the same rationale of killing potential life, the research into the regenerative possibilities of stem cells has also been called into question. No doubt, the issues of being able freely to choose an abortion, that is, to choose to end the potential of life (not life but the potential of life), and the appropriateness of stem cell research with the use of human embryonic stem cells are not without moral questions. The forces behind such individual freedom of choice must continually articulate their positions openly and fully to show that the entirety of life is enhanced by such choices while being respectful of the moral concern of others. Nevertheless, some American fundamentalist Christians are attempting to actualize their vision of a Christian-based moral order upon society, local as well as global. In the recent United States election, there was a great outpouring of rage and fear from those associated with a conservative or fundamentalist Christianity that saw an immoral turn in the mainstream of popular cultural attitudes and practices. They have appealed to the moral outrage of many like-thinking Christians to rid present American society of what they see as unchristian immorality. The criteria to judge what is right and wrong is a vital issue, nevertheless a radical, denunciation of a person's activities and way of life from a simplistic, exclusivistic point of view whether liberal or conservative is not a constructive endeavor. Moreover, while espousing religious tolerance, the American government with the explicit consent of a good portion of the citizenry have sent troops to two Islamic countries and threaten another in the name of fighting terrorism and nuclear proliferation. In no way denying the reality and danger of terrorism, fundamentalist Islamic as well as other forms, and the spread of nuclear weapons, I believe a more reflective, self-critical view of one's own actions are necessary to curb an all too blatant certitude and self-righteousness. Simple Christian tolerance and charity seem to be wanting.

One aspect of these phenomena of confrontations between the religious fundamentalists and secular forces is that for many people among the secular forces, there is an ignorance as well as a belittling of the religious intuitions and thinking of all religiously oriented people with a superiority born of this ignorance and disdain. It could be labeled a secular fanaticism or fundamentalism. True, the ignorance, bigotry, cruel sexism, and tribalism of religiously fundamentalist forces cannot be denied. They are rightly abhorred and should be quickly condemned by both religious and non-religious voices.

In recent research on religious fundamentalism, centering on the phenomena of late 19th and early 20th century American Christian Protestantism, I was surprised to find that there was little evidence of a doctrinal or theological rationale for the development of the fundamentalist tradition. Admittedly, there was the liberal Christian tradition developed in Germany from the

mid-19th Century centering on a critical biblical studies and a historical-critical approach to the development of church doctrine leading to a critical church history. Both critical biblical studies and church history de-absolutized the view Christianity. This movement did, indeed, have some doctrinal impact and caused conservative-fundamentalist Christians to attack these liberal Protestant Christian thinkers. Nevertheless, the social and cultural ridicule of the religiously conservatives by the surrounding non-religious, secular humanist forces, was the central rationale for an adamant counter response. Indeed, a rather perverse delight could be seen by Christian fundamentalists in holding to these fundamentalist beliefs and convictions by centering on the certainty of an unquestioning, literalist understanding of the biblical story. The cultural and social ridicule by outside forces as well as critical interpretive voices within were met by a stubborn radicalization of their fundamentalist beliefs. However, it was and still is the secular, non-believing ridicule of these non-believing secularists that was the central impetus to fall back on a more absolutist stance. (see Mardsen, Cromartie, Marty and Appleby, and Yokota).

Christian ethical thought is not represented only by this absolutist, fundamentalist way of thought. The neo-orthodox thought of Reinhold Niebuhr formed and expanded upon from the 1930's to his death in 1971 still has much to say to both liberal Christians, non-Christian or non-religious moderns as well as fundamentalist Christians. The term neo-orthodox may be misleading. It does not mean a return to an earlier orthodoxy of strict, literal adherence to the biblical tale but to a position fully aware of a liberal, open way of thought that is also, however, mindful of and insistent on the biblical position which sees all individuals as prideful and self-deceptive, in short, as religious sinners. By chance, a recent article appeared in the *International Herald Tribune* (Tuesday, November 9, 2004 : p. 7), by Gary Hart, former teacher of religious thought trained at Yale Divinity School and former US Senator from Colorado and two time candidate for the Democratic nomination for president (who some may remember was caught in an adulterous relationship and therefore gave up political life). He calls forth to all people but specifically Christians to remember the basic humility that arises from the insight of all believing Christians that they are sinners, forgiven by God, but sinners nonetheless and thus always tragically prone to a pride that their beliefs are a universal good untainted by their own personal self-interest and the collective self-interest of their particular social group. This insight that all Christians are sinners and thus one's individual and corporate acts are all tinged with some degree of self-importance and a basically self-deluding self-centeredness is one basic insight of Niebuhr and the christian tradition. It is primarily a personal, individual insight which has trans-personal implications.

Two fundamental and inter-related themes are central to the Christian theory of social ethics. One is that the ethic of love alone is insufficient to cause a change in socio-political structures.

Justice must be introduced. Justice is the introduction of the standard of rightness by which a certain socio-political situation is judged. It implies the realistic appraisal of the situation and the realistic implementation of means that will change the situation into one approximating the ideal. Concreteness and specificity are implied by the introduction of justice. The other theme of the ethic of love emphasizes the freedom of the individual as the goal toward which Christian social ethics leads. Again, this reflects the focus on specificity. An abstract ideal of justice and righteousness is useless unless the issue of an individual's freedom to develop his or her personality to its fullest potential is addressed. It is this concern for freedom and specificity that the Christian theory of social ethics develops. A related consideration especially developed by Reinhold Niebuhr is that it is the sinner who calls for and implements justice. This recognition of the depths of a perverse self-concern helps the Christian to guard against self-righteousness. It is quite easy to delude oneself into believing that one is implementing God's will and not a human and personal image and / or misrepresentation of God's will. These three elements of specificity, freedom, and the recognition of sin can be seen as the key elements of what Niebuhr calls Christian Realism.

Christian Realism

Christian Realism negates the Christian notion of the two realms. It can be assumed that the present-day fundamentalist oriented forms of Christianity hold to a traditional view of the two realms doctrine. A premise of much of historical Christianity's formulation of social ethics was this doctrine of the two realms associated so closely with Luther and sectarian Lutheranism. Christian Realism, like most liberal, contemporary Christian social-ethical theory, maintains but one realm and this is God's realm. Human society and institutions cannot be divorced from the spiritual realm. The principal defect of the two realms perspective is that it can be used to justify less than ideal conditions of equality and justice. The secular world was seen as essentially God-less, fleeting and inconsequential imperfection. The concern was for the salvation centered in the spiritual realm. It is this Christian bifurcation of reality—the true and the false—that was the obvious target of Marx's critique : people were told to forego their desire for justice and equality in this world for an ideal bliss in the coming world. As long as this bifurcated view of the two realms was the basis for the social-ethical theory of Christianity, there could be no forceful argument for the actualization of the love and justice that characterizes God as also characterizing the ideal social realm. Rather, the existing social order was seen as a temporal waystation preparing one for the true existence of the future life. In this context, even though there can be an acknowledged relationship between the two realms, the secular order in its imperfection is seen

as ordained by God and thus not to be tampered with. The world and the social order are the creations of God and while the world to come will be much different, nothing should be done to change the social order since one will, in effect, be changing God's will. The question of whether Luther himself advanced such a notion is one that is still being argued. Nevertheless, later Lutheranism did indeed rigidly formulate this doctrine.

The Christian Notion of Sin

Christian Realism, again, is one with the modern perspective in denying the bifurcation of reality into unrelated divine and secular realms. It is critical of the Lutheran orthodoxy. However, with its emphasis on the pervasiveness of sin, it goes against much of modern and contemporary theological and secular thought. It is because of the reality of sin that Christian Realism sees this world as never totally identical with the divine ideal. If the divine and secular were merely identical, then an ethic of love would be sufficient. It is because they are not identical that the ethic of justice must be introduced so as to guarantee an approximation of the ideal of love. While the ethic of love is the ideal toward which Christian ethics moves, the pride and self preoccupation that are sin never allow that ethic of love to have full control over one's actions. This is true for individual actions and even more true for corporate actions. Thus, the ethic of justice is introduced to control, with practical measures, this innate tendency to think of one's own benefit. It is from this perspective that Niebuhr argued for unionization and argued against pacifism. It is only in the collective means open to a union that economic and political forces be forced to recognize the injustice and inequality of their position. Merely appealing to the sentiments of owners as caring human beings is not enough. In most instances, the love ethic alone cannot force confrontation with issues that divide two opposing groups. Concerted group resistance is necessary to bring about change among the corporate employers to bring about a modicum of fairness. It is in his hesitation about the limits of love that Niebuhr, therefore, could not endorse pacifism.

His notion of pacifism as being overly optimistic of its powers to bring about change comes from an insight, realistic perhaps, that force is necessary to end certain evils. Niebuhr argued against love based pacifism because he felt that the forces of injustice must be coerced to change through concerted acts, ideally not violence, but through specific social force. There were times when violence may be necessary, but in most instances, the forces behind the power structure brutally crush such acts. The reason he specifically ruled out force in the case of the American civil rights movement was the practicality that, if it were used, the white majority could easily annihilate the black minority. Nevertheless, the period of civil rights activity in the United States

was marked by much violence visited upon blacks and whites who engaged in activities for a fairer and better America. It is this recognition of the reality of sin, however, that reminds the union member and the social activist that their efforts toward justice can as easily take on injustice and corruption as the forces being fought. Self-righteousness and self-delusion about implementing God's will can be guarded against by a self-awareness of sin. On the one hand, Christian Realism is critical of Lutheran orthodoxy and its bifurcation of reality which leads to a conscience-free acceptance of an unjust status quo. On the other hand, it questions the Liberal Christian tendency of identifying human efforts towards the ideal with its actualization and neglecting the simple, practical and sometimes compromising efforts to make real an ideal. The Kingdom of God can never be fully of this world, since it is a religious afterworld pointing to final spiritual peace. It is not of this world. The idealism of utopianism, secular as well as religious, is very much seen as being as dangerous as the callousness of the bifurcated two realms vision of the world. Christian Realism, therefore, criticizes both.

Justice, as it is used in Christianity, implies practicality and specificity as well as the belief that the justice and love that characterizes God must and can be reflected in the social order. It also implies the recognition of sin. Certain pragmatic means have to be implemented so as to induce and maintain an approximation of the ideal in the recognition that personal and collective self concern hinder attempts at equality and benevolence. Moreover, the very need for justice and its implementation recognizes the pervading reality of sin and, thus, the recognition protects one from self-righteous advocating of justice and righteousness without regard to the sin that pervades one's own existence. The stone of self-righteousness can be thrown only by one who has not confessed one's own sin. Justice and the implementation of justice, then, have this broad range of implications. Justice and its implementation do not mean self-righteousness, puritanical strictures nor idealistic utopianism. It does mean, ideally, pragmatic and specific concern that the love and justice that are God's are reflected as fully as possible into the social fabric of a society. If there is a lack of such love and justice, then the call of justice in Christianity warrants a conscious and full attempt to actualize that love and justice. The love and justice will be an approximation of the love and justice of God, and one, as a Christian, must attempt to realize this approximation. It is an approximation, nevertheless, and never the fullness of God's love and justice. Thus, the implementation of justice is a never ending process which recognizes the diligence needed to implement and maintain justice and the diligence needed to guard oneself against thinking one has indeed truly implemented God's justice and love on earth.

Freedom, as noted above, echoes justice's implications of specificity and is intimately related to the actualization of justice. In many ways, the actualization of justice can be seen as the actualization of freedom in that justice's presence can be gauged by the level of freedom every individual

enjoys in a particular society. The presence of freedom is implied in a society that allows each individual to develop to his or her fullest potential without regard to social, financial, racial, or political status. This, like justice, is an ideal that is only actualized to varying degrees. The Western fascination with the individual and personal integrity are at the core of this emphasis on freedom. Justice means justice for the individual and that translates into freedom for the individual. Specificity is, again, a key element. Justice and freedom mean justice and freedom for the individual in a specific social context. The easy platitudes of love, freedom, peace and fellowship are hardened in the fire of practicality and specificity. In the United States, that means there have to be laws that guarantee neither active nor passive discrimination because of race or sex in the nation's social, educational, economic and political structures. However, especially in the recent past, we have seen an attitude in which passive restraint is not enough and an active rectification of the situation is needed so that women and certain traditionally abused minorities can truly participate equally in society. Here, the platitudes are translated into practical means to guarantee, imperfectly perhaps, certain ideals. It should be added that in the more recent period of the second Bush administration, there has been a conscious and increased effort to pull back from the critical advances of the recent past. The notion of justice and freedom, then, imply practicality and specificity. In turn, this practicality and specificity insist that ideals must be actualized into concrete steps that ensure the best approximation toward those ideals. Ideals, unless they are actualized, are useless. Justice and freedom imply this need for actualization.

Freedom and justice, while so intimately interrelated also act at cross purposes. To be free to develop and fulfill one's potential can mean that one will infringe on the freedom of another and thus cause tension in the actualization of the ideal justice. The notion of justice, while implying specificity and concreteness, is abstract in the sense that universality and the ideal of the general welfare are inherently involved in the notion of justice. Freedom, on the other hand, while also having this universal characteristic centers, especially in the West, on the freedom of the individual and is connected with the idea of individualism. It is this aspect of individualism and the Calvinistic work ethic that forms a basis for the rise of capitalism in the West. Certain real problems have arisen with the rise of a blind faith in capitalism. Material benefits have also been real but in many ways, these benefits have exacerbated the problems and have brought forth the whole question of equality and fairness. Nevertheless, even with these inherent faults in the notion of freedom, this is an ideal that Christianity takes seriously.

This question of freedom is addressed by Niebuhr and forms one of the more complex aspects of his thought. Freedom is that which makes a human being fully human. This innate ability to rise beyond oneself and beyond natural and social instincts and conditions is what marks the uniqueness of the human individual. Yet, it is precisely this capacity of self-transcendence that is

the basic cause of pride and thus is the fundamental basis of sin. To be fully human and to enjoy freedom, then, is to enjoy the fruits of humanity and the pains of the reality of sin. Niebuhr was especially sensitive to the tragedy in the exercise of freedom. Here, again, his recognition of the reality of sin plays an important part in recognizing the limits of this notion of freedom. Yet he obviously sees the vital role it plays in the human drama, since it is this quality that makes one fully human. Here, justice while on the one hand, complemented by freedom, on the other hand, helps to guard against the dangers of freedom and individualism by putting forth the notion of fairness and the general good. The paradox of this fascination with freedom and the individual and the promotion of equality and fairness is a peculiarly western paradox. The more recent advent of individualism in cultures unfamiliar with it and unfamiliar with the Judeo-Christian foundation may be even more troubled by the paradoxes that individualism presents.

Christian social ethical theory, centered on the dialectically complementary and negating aspects of justice and freedom and tempered by the recognition of personal and corporate sin, sees in the image of God as just and loving, first, a call to actualize as fully as possible this justice and love in the world through realistic and practical means suited for specific situations and, second, a guard against deceiving oneself into believing that what one is actually implementing is God's justice and love and not, at best, a far from perfect approximation.

The Religious Notion of Sin

The Christian notion of sin has been maligned from within and outside of Christianity for centuries. It is a notion that has been, admittedly, abused and is still holding many believers under a spell of fear and dread. Nevertheless, the reality that the doctrine points to, an unfathomable, perplexing tendency we humans have both to look at ourselves as somehow fundamentally perverted, malacious, and depraved as well as somehow destined to be the beloved center of all is an insightful intuition into a basic reality of humans, singularly as well as a group. We simultaneously negate ourselves as being worthless and assert that we are the center of the universe. It is this perverseness of exaggerated self-worth and exaggerated self-negation that is indicated by the doctrine of sin. The notion of sin is not unique to Christianity, nevertheless, especially in its Protestant elaborations by Luther, Calvin and their followers, one sees a central focusing on this reality of human existence. Other religious traditions do not ignore this reality, but it is especially Christianity that emphasizes it as well as the corresponding reality of a God of grace and salvation. Nevertheless, in the Buddhist tradition of Japan one sees a surprisingly similar insight in the thought of the Pure Land devotee Shinran centering both on the individual insight into one's karmic evil and sin and the compassionate saving power of Amida Buddha.

This inter-cultural and inter-religious parallel may not prove anything, but it does indicate a surprisingly similar trans-cultural, trans-historical insight into humanity as well as a salvific-benevolent activity in our lives.

The Judeo-Christian notion of sin is unfortunately connected with the Genesis account of the fall of humanity and the ousting of Adam and Eve from the primordial paradise of Eden. It is a myth. But myths attempt to express certain deep-seated realities about our lives that prosaic expression cannot fully describe. We human beings have a propensity toward a prideful exertion, consciously and unconsciously, of putting our personal priorities and desires before all others. Moreover, we have developed many defences to hide this fact from others but more importantly from ourselves. It can be said, in our defence, that this tendency is understandable and no cause for undue alarm. Nevertheless, our hypocrisy toward others and ourselves is damning not only to others but to ourselves. We continually hide the extent of our self-preoccupations. The religious insight of sin, at its best, can help us from a too comfortable, self-complacent ignorance of who we are individually and collectively and what we sometimes individually and collectively do.

The Sinner Doing Good

Niebuhr's insight into this problem and its social implications has much to say to us today. When each of us try to do the right thing, we must, of course, look at the situation as objectively as possible and try to find a solution that is both fair and practical. Nevertheless, we will always view the situation from our own perspective and priorities. This is understandable. Nevertheless, this self-centered orientation must be both acknowledged and repeatedly recalled when one attempts to think and work through a viable and fair solution. Our individual and collective ability to make us believe we are implementing a fair and an objective decision is always automatically and unconsciously subverted by a perverse priority to see the situation from our own values and priorities. A constant remembrance of this fact is necessary.

How is one to proceed in any activity in such a situation? Activity and reflection must be performed simultaneously. Moreover, the ambiguity of a situation must be acknowledged wherein there is neither a perfect good nor a complete evil. I would append the statement of no complete evil by the fact that those acts thought to be carried out in the name of good have more often than not been the cause of more evil and pain than intentionally evil acts. Of course, no one would admit to be consciously committing evil acts. War is evil and yet at times perhaps necessary. A vigilance must be had to guard against errors of judgment as well as ulterior motives for attacking a supposed enemy. That Saddam Hussein was and is a very dangerous and cruel person goes without saying. Moreover, it goes without saying that many Iraqis are better

off with him gone. Nevertheless, the moral ambiguity of war and the excesses and just plain mistakes of war must be fully appreciated so that wrongful and wrongly thought out acts be kept to a minimum. Morally and religiously we must be conscious of the fact that a supposedly good act can indeed cause pain and evil. The present state of affairs in Iraq and Afghanistan illustrate this reality. How could things have been made better. Perhaps, it begins with the fact that we are and never will be the 'good guys'. We will always have ulterior motives with the pressure of combat pressing us to blur moral lines that in a more rational setting we would perhaps be able to discern and therefore desist from. War is most cruel to both the victims and the aggressors

The present abuse of Judeo-Christian moral values to sanction these acts of aggression and killing should not be allowed. These traditions must return to their original self-critical stance that innately recognizes the pride and self-aggrandizing tendencies that the recognition of the reality of sin tells us to beware. It is only as sinner, an aware sinner, that the beginnings of something approaching a less evil behavior will have a chance. The Judeo-Christian tradition has within its traditional roots the means to curtail the over-simplifying pieties of the religious fervor of the certainty of one's non-reflective faith. It is only in the humble and sinner conscious attitude of the faithful that perhaps some hope can come from the troubles we are presently in. To be a Jew and to be a Christian should mean to be humble in the majesty and mystery of God and beware of following the false idols of pride, bigotry and jingoistic patriotism.

The ideal of a liberal Christianity that is, however, self-conscious of the reality of sin is the type of Christianity, the type of religious thought, that is open to the dialog with science and the problems that plague our contemporary world

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