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Reinhold Niebuhr: The nature and implications of the relationship between his christology and anthropology

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REINHOLD NIEBUHR:
THE NATURE AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN HIS CHRISTOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

by

DANIEL COLEMAN

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ABSTRACT

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Only an interpretation of Reinhold Niebuhr which consistently adheres to the ideal/real dialectical structure intrinsic to his hermeneutics of myth does justice to the tensions inherent in his thought. The failure to preserve this dialectical tension results in one group of scholars regarding his christology as determinative and a larger group giving his anthropology this position. Therefore, the structure of his thought is better illustrated as an ellipse having two foci rather than a single-centered circle. Niebuhr's characterization of the ideal/real nature of this dialectical tension, however, implies that the truth of the former member is perspectival and the latter established upon more empirical grounds. The absence of metaphysical assertions about the ideal member of the dialectic ultimately requires that Christianity be interpreted from a relativistic perspective without criteria for asserting Christianity as unique in any but a personal existential fashion.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In classical religion there is always a paradoxical attitude toward human nature. Man is both a child of God and a sinner.... This emphasis upon the sinfulness of man has been just as strong, in classical religion, as the emphasis upon his Godlikeness.¹

Attempting to mirror what he perceives as "classical religion," Reinhold Niebuhr stresses the paradoxical quality of our human identity as both children of God and sinners, and tries hard to affirm the truth of both while maintaining the dialectical tension between the two. This "paradox," as Niebuhr calls it, is a theme which continues through the whole of his career, and is a source of contention about the pervasive tone of Niebuhr's thinking: Should Niebuhr's work be systematically interpreted upon the basis of his understanding of the sinful quality of human beings? Or should we focus upon the identity of human beings as recipients of God's grace to rightly interpret Niebuhr's thought? Which of his two features of humanity takes precedence over the other?

In examining the attempts at a systematic interpretation of Reinhold Niebuhr's thought, the differing nature of the conclusions those attempts have reached is surprising--not only the contradictions between scholars writing about him, but the irreconcilable statements Niebuhr himself has made in commenting upon those interpretations. A majority of scholars regard Niebuhr's anthropology (or his doctrine of sin) to be the center and/or foundation of his thinking while a significant minority understand his christology to be central. Meanwhile, Niebuhr seems to have given his

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approval--at least tacitly--to both groups. Why do these discrepancies exist and why does Niebuhr seem oblivious to them?

Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall edited, in 1956, Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought; this volume contains the essays "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man" and "The Christology of Reinhold Niebuhr" by William John Wolf and Paul Lehmann, respectively. Wolf and Lehmann, both reputable scholars and personal friends of Niebuhr, arrive at contradictory conclusions regarding the structure and movement of Niebuhr's thought and, in his response to their exposition and criticism of his work which concludes the volume, Niebuhr fails to resolve or even to recognize the exclusivity of Wolf and Lehmann's interpretations.

Lehmann represents the minority view which regards Niebuhr's christology as structurally determinative for his thinking. Because Niebuhr is "thinking mythically," Lehmann says, it is possible for him to argue the relevance of the Christian faith beginning from either an analysis of human experience or the Christian kerygma itself; but if this "mythical" element of Niebuhr's thought is ignored, one might falsely conclude that "his thought moves in principle from reason to faith, from history to gospel, from anthropology to Christology."¹ According to Lehmann, precisely the opposite is the case; it is his christology which precedes his anthropology.² Despite the absence of a systematic treatment of christological issues, christology is

foundational as it is the "fulcrum" of his thought--"the key to the understanding and interpretation of his work."¹

Lehmann regards Niebuhr's account of Jesus Christ as the "leitmotiv" of his theology and gives three general characteristics of Niebuhr's christology to guide us in our assessment of it: first, christology is "pivotal" and not peripheral in Niebuhr's thought; second, his christology is more "implicit" than explicit; third, "Niebuhr's Christology is reverse, not regular."²

What Lehmann means by this third characteristic is that instead of following the path taken by theological liberalism, Niebuhr does not begin with the Jesus of history, instead he begins with the Christ of faith--the Christ of our religious experience--as "the basis of and the key to Jesus' historical significance." According to Lehmann,

it is this reverse aspect of Niebuhr's Christology which is the key to it. His thought moves from the Christus in nobis to the Christus pro nobis; and only in the light of the latter does the Christological significance of what has preceded become plain.³

Thus, at least in a developmental sense, Lehmann sees a reciprocal or circular movement in Niebuhr's christological thought. His exposition of the meaning for us of the Christ of faith precedes his attention to the Jesus of history, but it is the latter which is the presupposition of the former and without which would render the Christ of faith impossible.

As support for his position, Lehmann draws upon Hans Hofmann's recollection of a private conversation with Niebuhr wherein Niebuhr stated that "his theology... is actually intended to be nothing more than the

¹Lehmann, op. cit., pp. 329, 351.
³Lehmann, op. cit., pp. 255, 256.
analysis of the truth about *Christus pro nobis* and *Christus in nobis* in its significance for man."1 (Ironically, although Hofmann recorded the conversation and Lehmann quotes it as support for his own view, Hofmann arrived at an assessment of the structure of Niebuhr's thought which opposes Lehmann's.)

In reply, Niebuhr affirms an aspect of Lehmann's basic thesis by acknowledging the essay as "an appreciative account of the centrality of my Christological interest."2 From his early position of having adopted the christology of "old liberalism", Niebuhr says he has attempted to develop a "more adequate Christology." Consequently,

the Christological center of my thought has become more explicit and more important. But . . . I have never pretended to be a theologian, and so I have elaborated the Christological theme only in the context of inquiries about human nature and human history.3

Gordon Harland agrees with Lehmann's interpretation of the structure of Niebuhr's thought. Uncritically affirming Lehmann's conclusions, Harland refers to Lehmann's 1956 article as "so accurate and penetrating as to render further exposition unnecessary."4 Harland accedes that the "center" of Niebuhr's thought is clearly and unmistakably his christology; for Niebuhr, christology is "of the highest importance."5

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3Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 515.


William John Wolf, however, whose essay immediately precedes Lehmann's in the Kegley volume, opposes the views of Lehmann, Harland, and possibly Niebuhr himself. Wolf sees Niebuhr's *anthropology* as his "most significant contribution" to contemporary theology. Wolf proposes that, in contrast to systematizers such as Thomas Aquinas or Karl Barth, Niebuhr has made his exposition of this one doctrine "the basis of his whole thought." It is "determinative" of his social ethics, his interpretation of history, and, "concentrated in terms of personality, and brought into correlation with the historic Christian revelation, it defines his understanding of Christology."¹

Regardless of the picture Wolf initially presents of the causal relationship between anthropology and the remainder of Niebuhr's thought, Wolf subsequently warns us of the dialectical character of his thought—a warning Wolf takes into account only inconsistently.² Wolf goes so far as to accuse some of Niebuhr's critics of "an inability to understand Niebuhr's dialectical thought," but despite his understanding of Niebuhr's dialectic, Wolf does not use it to understand the relationship of anthropology to the other features of Niebuhr's theology, specifically his christology.³ Wolf's working picture of Niebuhr's thought is not that of a dialectic, but of a foundation—Niebuhr's anthropological thought—upon which is erected a superstructure of the remainder of his work.

²Wolf, op. cit., p. 307f.
³Cf. Wolf, op. cit., p. 320.
Niebuhr's response to Wolf's essay acknowledges that he "makes some very telling criticisms on peripheral points which I must heartily accept," but leaves the underlying premise of Wolf's essay (that anthropology is the basis of Niebuhr's thought) unquestioned. Since Wolf's position is a popular view that Niebuhr must have been well acquainted with, Niebuhr's silence appears to imply agreement. But because he explicitly affirmed Lehmann's assertion of the christological centrality of his thought, Niebuhr's silence here leaves his own position ambiguous.

Wolf's interpretation of Niebuhr shares much in common with that of Hans Hofmann whose doctoral dissertation, written under Emil Brunner, was published in German two years before Wolf's essay (an English translation, entitled The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, was published in 1956). Wolf shares Hofmann's judgment of the anthropocentricity of Niebuhr's thought as well as Hofmann's criticism that Niebuhr fails to develop an adequate ecclesiology. Regarding his interest as "emphatically anthropocentric", Hofmann understands the problem of sin to be, for Niebuhr, the "chief question of theology"--his "central concern." Niebuhr's interpretation of the nature of sin is "the determinative structural element in his theology" and the "centre around which both his brilliant analyses and his attempts to indicate a redemptive solution circle." Hofmann declares Niebuhr "not so much a theologian as a Christian anthropologist."

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1Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 513.
3Hofmann, op. cit., pp. 87, 247 (my italics).
5Hofmann, op. cit., p. 146.
Hofmann, however, has also elaborated that Niebuhr’s "fundamental concern" is the dialectical tension between gospel and world. But Hofmann's focus upon sin as Niebuhr's "central concern" as determinative for his thought betrays that Hofmann does not consistently follow the dialectical structure that Niebuhr has proposed for himself and instead begins to think in causal terms. Ignoring his own observation that "the relation of gospel and world is the fixed centre of his thinking around which the whole continually turns", Hofmann proposes that Niebuhr's conclusions proceed from his anthropological observations in such a manner that they may be characterized as structurally determinative. In practice, Hofmann rejects the dialectical structure of Niebuhr's thought in favor of an interpretation which finds a clear direction of cause and effect leading from anthropology to the remainder of Niebuhr's thought.

Writing approximately ten years later (in 1965), Hofmann qualifies his position somewhat, but does not modify it substantially.

For Niebuhr the precise point at which the Gospel and the world confront one another is in man. Thus the focal point of Niebuhr's interest is man. Though he does not ignore other facets of theological concern, from the start it was the doctrine of man, theological anthropology, that consumed his attention. The title of his chief work, The Nature and Destiny of Man, delivered as the Gifford Lectures when he was at the zenith of his influence, summarizes what was Niebuhr's central concern.

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1Hofmann, op. cit., pp. 238, 247.
2Hofmann, op. cit., p. 234.
Later, he adds that "some critics regard his doctrine of man as sinner as his central contribution to contemporary Christian thought."\textsuperscript{1} In this later essay, however, Hofmann does not explicitly include himself within this group whereas his earlier book seems to clearly place him within this category.

Niebuhr himself clearly emphasizes the brokenness of the human condition against a prevailing climate he understood as having false hope in the moral progress of humanity--a hope grown out of a too-shallow understanding of the depth of human evil. Niebuhr corrects this condition with his reinterpretation of original sin; but sin is not the sum of Niebuhr's anthropology. Despite sin, no firm limitations on the human potential for good can be set in history.\textsuperscript{2}

Regarding christology, Hofmann states that

Niebuhr is not particularly interested in a full doctrinal exposition of either Christology or grace. Although he is pre-eminently interested in the work of the Spirit through man, Niebuhr does not intend to minimize the significance of Christology. He acknowledges that the penal theory of salvation on the cross must be kept in careful balance with the view of grace as the inner work of the Spirit. However, more christocentrically oriented theologians have pointed out that Niebuhr has been less than successful in maintaining the proper balance.

With respect to Christology, Niebuhr's interest centers in its ethical significance for man. The revelation of God's love in Christ denies once and for all the human ambition to self-justification--even that of the pious.\textsuperscript{3}

\textsuperscript{1}Hofmann, op. cit., p. 367.
\textsuperscript{3}Hofmann, op. cit., p. 370.
Earlier, in the Kegley volume, Emil Brunner refers to his student's book in the context of praising Niebuhr's "widened Christian understanding of sin." Brunner understands Hofmann as having set forth the whole of Niebuhr's thought from the standpoint of his understanding of sin, and this presentation of it has met with complete approval from Niebuhr himself . . . . The Christian concept of sin is indeed one of the cornerstones of this structure of thought.\(^1\)

In Niebuhr's response to Brunner's brief essay, however, he fails to confirm or deny his "complete approval" of Hofmann's interpretation.\(^2\) Once again, Niebuhr's silence leaves the reader uncertain as to the appropriateness of regarding Niebuhr's thought to issue from an anthropological or a christological base.

Hofmann's focus upon Niebuhr's "central concern" as determinative for his thought betrays that Hofmann—like Wolf—does not consistently follow the dialectical structure that Niebuhr has proposed for himself and instead begins to think in causal terms.\(^3\) Thus, Hofmann proposes that Niebuhr's conclusions proceed from his anthropological observations.

Hofmann and Wolf are not alone in using anthropology as the key to interpreting Niebuhr. Holton P. Odegard, a political scientist rather than a theologian, believes that "human nature and sin" occupy the "dominant

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position" in Niebuhr's thought such that sin is Niebuhr's "central, overwhelming idea" and his "predominant preoccupation." 1

Niebuhr early became preoccupied with one aspect of the whole, which soon became his comprehensive touchstone of interpretation. While sin does not eclipse freedom but rather accompanies it like a dogged shadow on a sunny day, Niebuhr treats sin much more systematically and in much greater detail to the effect that it becomes the fundamental principle upon which his interpretations are based. 2

Compared with Wolf, Lehmann, Harland, or Hofmann, Odegard offers a more serious critique of Niebuhr by issuing a challenge to the theological presuppositions grounding his thought. In Odegard's view, since Niebuhr's interpretations of experience are done through the framework of Christian faith, Christianity cannot but prove to be a more coherent resource for interpreting the world and human nature. Despite the fact that Niebuhr wishes to subject his faith to the critique of experience, it is through the presuppositions of his faith that he interprets experience which in turn critiques his faith. From Odegard's vantage point this is circular reasoning. 3

The interpretive circle Niebuhr's thought moves along is easily demonstrated, but a distinction must be made between circularity and vicious (and thus fallacious) circularity. 4 Odegard, being a political scientist, does not necessarily share Niebuhr's theological presuppositions. Since Odegard understands Niebuhr's politics to flow from his theology, 5 Odegard

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2Odegard, op. cit., p. 21 (my italics).
3Odegard, op. cit., p. 29.
is right to call attention to the circularity of his thought. Whether or not this constitutes vicious circularity, however, depends upon the premises—the point of view—of the one making the judgement. In the case of his more theologically sympathetic critics who share many of Niebuhr’s premises, this criticism will never be heard. In the case of Odegard who rejects Niebuhr’s theological underpinnings, his thought must necessarily be interpreted as viciously circular.

Unlike Wolf, Hofmann, Lehmann, and Niebuhr himself, Odegard is more careful in his metaphorical use of the terms “center” or “foundation.” He keeps in mind the pervasiveness of the use of dialectic in Niebuhr’s thought and the difficulties it brings to interpreting him—notably, his use of dialectic and paradox is one of Odegard’s strong objections to Niebuhr. He observes that “Few philosophers... start from a single basic concept; they rather have a basic set of concepts, more or less interdependent.”1 In Niebuhr’s case, “dialectic is central to his theology” and, in fact, to the whole of his thought, philosophical as well as political.2 Thus, in relation to the other “dogmatic or a priori” features of Niebuhr’s thought, the foundational nature of his doctrine of sin both can and cannot be demonstrated.3 In one sense, the dominant role of Niebuhr’s doctrine of human nature and sin

cannot be rigidly demonstrated because neither human nature nor sin is the starting point from which the rest of Niebuhr’s philosophy is derived in a logical or a necessary fashion. This for two reasons: first, a theologian (and there is no doubt that Niebuhr is a theologian before he is anything else) would be a contradiction in terms and, by Niebuhr’s own testimony, the greatest of hypocritical sinners if he did not postulate God and derive man therefrom. Second, a philosophy

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1Odegard, op. cit., p. 11 (my italics).
2Odegard, op. cit., p. 31.
3Odegard, op. cit., p. 35.
built of the strings of dialectic and the straws of paradox is not a simple, step-by-step construction.¹

However, Odegard alleges,

in another and more fundamental sense—that is, in the sense of warping, limiting, conditioning, necessitating, and influencing—the dominant centrality of human nature and particularly of the sin in human nature, cannot be shown. This may be seen in the interrelations obtaining between human nature and sin, and the other a priori assumptions [of Niebuhr's: faith, dialectic, and meaning].²

Odegard understands Niebuhr's anthropological assertions to be derived from his theological premises, in this sense, it is theology and not anthropology which is foundational. Anthropology (or more specifically, Niebuhr's doctrine of sin) occupies the central position due to its emphasis and the pervasiveness of its influence.

Nevertheless, it is uncertain whether Odegard has consistently abided by his own verbal qualifications—he consistently interprets Niebuhr as if human nature and sin actually were the point of departure from which the rest of Niebuhr's thinking is logically derived. Furthermore, despite his awareness of the thoroughgoing nature of Niebuhr's dialectic, Odegard acknowledges little of this tension in his interpretation. Odegard focuses upon one side of the dialectic—sin, impossibility, justice—and leaves grace, possibility, and love, relatively neglected. This is particularly evident in his assertion that Niebuhr ultimately has "faith in sin"; conspicuously absent is an assertion of Niebuhr's conviction of the assurance of grace and of the wisdom, power, and (in Niebuhr's own words) the "real sanctification" available to human beings.³

¹Odegard, op. cit., p. 35. (my italics).
²Odegard, op. cit., p. 35. (my italics).
³Odegard, op. cit., p. 166; Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 513.
Odegard states that Niebuhr's philosophy of history is essentially a "fundamental pessimism upon which is dialectically erected a superstructure of hope and optimism." Clearly, despite his desire to do justice to Niebuhr's dialectical method, Odegard has pictured the relation as one in which pessimism is fundamental and optimism subordinate—a hierarchical rather than a truly dialectical relation.

However, regarding the characterization of Niebuhr as having an imbalanced emphasis on anthropology or sin, Holton Odegard is certainly a member of a crowd. Whitney J. Oates praises Niebuhr for having "a profound sense of the comprehensiveness of Christianity", and for his powerful reaction against what Oates characterizes as a narrow, imbalanced variety of naively optimistic Protestantism which has attempted to remove God from Christianity and consequently cut itself off from its "spiritual inheritance." Unlike this "modern version of Protestantism", Niebuhr's whole analysis sees both the human predicament and the Christian answers in terms of a series of closely interconnected paradoxes, and his development of these paradoxes reveals at every step that he recognizes fundamentally the "all-togetherness" of the Christian position. In fact, it would not be too much to say that his recognition of this basic quality of Christianity has given him his stature as a leading Protestant theologian. Yet another imbalance in its turn tends to vitiate Niebuhr's position. Planted squarely as he is in the prophetic tradition, he has concentrated too exclusively on the fallen state of man, or to put it somewhat facetiously, has been so busy rehabilitating sin as a fact of man's nature that other and equally important aspects of Christianity suffer from underemphasis.

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1 Odegard, op. cit., p. 54.
This question that Odegard and Oates bring up arises repeatedly. When asked if Niebuhr might be remembered primarily as a pessimistic "critic and analyst of sin," Paul Tillich replied that Niebuhr has also spoken of grace, but notes that

the impact which one makes is usually determined not only by what one does, but also the situation in which the listeners are; and the situation in this country was such that whatever he would have said about grace would not have made the tremendous impact which his analysis of the human situation has made.1

Tillich suggests that Odegard and Oates' evaluation of whether Niebuhr has placed an imbalanced emphasis upon sin is open to question. More recently, Robert McAfee Brown points out that the idea of grace in Niebuhr's thought is neither a late nor a peripheral development, but "informed the whole of Niebuhr's writing, coming to a crescendo at the end of the Gifford lectures."2 Nonetheless, the question must be asked if the balance of Niebuhr's dialectic is evident, why are such defenses needed?

Returning to the issue of the direction of the development of Niebuhr's thought, an interesting comparison with Odegard's position is that of Niebuhr's most recent biographer, Richard W. Fox. In his determination of Niebuhr's center and the direction in which his thought moves, Fox represents the reversed mirror-image of Odegard. Fox understands Niebuhr's thinking to proceed "from humanity to God, not--as with Barth and to some extent Richard Niebuhr--from God to humanity.... His starting point was always human needs, human powers, human responsibilities."3

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3Richard W. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper and
This quote suggests that not only Niebuhr's christology, but his theology as a whole proceeds from his anthropological observations, allowing Fox to later characterize Niebuhr as

a thoroughgoing naturalist despite his contempt for what he called "naturalism": the denial of human "spirit," the reduction of human nature to its psychic or physiological impulses. He had equal contempt for religious supernaturalism, which he thought voided man's native capacities and expunged man's own responsibility for his fate. His stance was naturalistic in the sense that his ultimate appeal in both politics and theology was always to the observed facts of human experience. His starting point was the community of concrete human beings confronted by the paradoxically free yet finite character of their nature.¹

Nonetheless, Fox also makes the statement--possibly taking its consequences too lightly--that Niebuhr is "Christocentric."²

Odegard understands a specifically theological anthropology of sin to be Niebuhr's center, regarding him in the last analysis to rely upon "supernaturalism,"³ deriving his anthropological observations from his religious presuppositions. Fox makes the opposite contention. Knowing Niebuhr as one who disavowed the possibility of God acting miraculously in history, who lacked "the slightest interest in the empty tomb or physical resurrection", and who rejected belief in "individual immortality", Fox sees Niebuhr's theology as based upon anthropological presuppositions to the degree that he may be accurately characterized as a "thoroughgoing naturalist."⁴ Where Fox asserts that Niebuhr begins with "human beings confronted by the paradoxically free yet finite character of their nature".

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¹Fox, op. cit., p. 217.
²Odegard, op. cit., p. 8.
³Fox, op. cit., p. 47.
⁴Fox, op. cit., pp. 215, 217.
Odegard would respond that the declaration of this "paradox" is derived not from an analysis of human experience, but from Niebuhr's theological presuppositions about the nature of human being.

From the foregoing examples, it would seem possible to simplistically classify scholars of Reinhold Niebuhr's thought along a continuum bounded by two extremes. At one end would be those who find his anthropological concerns to be the base or center from which the whole of his thought radiates and at the other would be those who make similar assertions of his christology. William John Wolf, Holton Odegard, Whitney Oates, and Hans Hofmann, clearly see anthropology as Niebuhr's central concern; other facets of his thought, christology included, proceed implicitly in more or less linear fashion from this basis (although Odegard theoretically qualifies this). Paul Lehmann, Gordon Harland, and Richard Fox, on the other hand, assert the centrality of Niebuhr's christology (Fox, however, does not see christology as Niebuhr's philosophical base). Each of these scholars seems to imply that Niebuhr's thought proceeds in roughly linear fashion from a relatively fixed base--despite frequent cautions regarding the dialectical nature of Niebuhr's thought. They differ in the identity of that base and whether they regard that base as explicitly central. Odegard and Fox, however, highlight the difficulty of this mixed metaphor. Whereas most of the scholars so far examined regard "center" and "foundation" or "base" as synonymous terms, Odegard and Fox have not used the terms in this manner.

Regardless of the variety of approaches, no one has presented an interpretation of Niebuhr's theology from a consistently dialectical frame of reference. Despite the acknowledgement of the dialectical structure of his thought, scholars seem invariably to fall upon either side of the dialectic and
argue for the centrality or foundationality of the side of Niebuhr upon which they have chosen to focus. They begin with an acknowledgement of the dialectical character of Niebuhr’s thought, but quickly abandon dialectical thinking in favor of causal thinking. This is why the controversy exists.

The contention over the centrality of his anthropology or christology arises from the difficulty of adhering consistently to the dialectic nature of Niebuhr’s thought intrinsic to his theological method—a difficulty that not only his interpreters, but Niebuhr also shares. Fox warns us of the need to preserve the tension in Niebuhr’s work, but ultimately fails to do this, the most notable example is his characterization of Niebuhr as a “naturalist.” Meanwhile, Odegard errs in the opposite direction, interpreting Niebuhr as a supernaturalist. The subtle complexity of Niebuhr’s position cannot be adequately characterized by the simple terms “naturalist” or “supernaturalist.”

The most appropriate model for interpreting the coherence of Niebuhr’s thought is a thoroughgoing dialectical model—the method Niebuhr self-consciously uses—rather than the more linear causal models epitomized in the most pronounced fashion by Wolf and Lehmann.

As Robert McAfee Brown warns: when the reader comes across a paragraph by Niebuhr beginning with “on the one hand” the reader should not stop until he or she has finished the next section beginning with “on the other hand.” Graphically, Niebuhr’s thought is not best illustrated as a circle or sphere with one distinct center—an ellipse with its dual foci is a better method of conceiving the dialectical nature of his thought as a whole, relating gospel and world, and specifically the relationship between Niebuhr’s anthropology and christology. It is these twin equal foci which
together make up the center and foundation of Niebuhr's thought. 
Repeatedly he has examined their different aspects: gospel and world, grace 
and sin, impossibility and possibility, etc. It is this overarching structure of 
Niebuhr's thought which provides the most appropriate model for 
interpreting the relationship between his anthropology and christology. If 
adhered to consistently, it lends the most promise for articulating faithfully 
the subtlety of Niebuhr's theoretical position. Afterwards, the question can 
be examined as to whether his practical emphasis is as balanced as his 
theoretical model would suggest.

Superficially, Niebuhr's thought proceeds temporally from anthropology 
to christology, but undoubtedly the anthropology with which he begins is of 
a theological character—it is an anthropology which "expects a Christ."
Pervasively, christology and anthropology exist in Niebuhr's thought in 
cotemporal dialectic; no anthropological assertion exists without its 
christological complement, and vice versa. Neither anthropology nor 
christology is "fundamental" without the other. Odegard's statement that 
"few philosophers... start from a single basic concept; they rather have a 
basic set of concepts, more or less interdependent", is more applicable to 
Niebuhr than Odegard sees.

As Harry Davis and Robert Good have warned,

the architecture of Niebuhr's political and ethical thought is anything 
but simple. It is full of dialectical cantilevers. The whole is suspended 
in marvelous tension like some Gothic cathedral that rises and is held 
fast only by the elaboration of opposing forces. Man as creature is 
counterpoised with man as creator. Necessity is juxtaposed with 
freedom, possibility with impossibility, love with law, sin with grace, 
history with eternity [and anthropology with Christology]. . . . No one
of these perspectives may be ignored or minimized without damaging Niebuhr's complex synthesis.¹

In his writing, his christology shares its centrality in dialectic with his anthropology, but in spite of this underlying theoretical structure, there has been an evolutionary development over time in the balance of the relationship between his anthropology and christology. Earlier in his career, when Niebuhr sought to correct what he interpreted as the false optimism of liberalism, he did emphasize the reality of sin to the detriment of other important doctrines. However, he has never elaborated sin to the complete exclusion of more positive ideas—there is always an implicit christology behind his more explicit anthropological assertions.

The conclusion that Niebuhr is simply a pessimist rests with a hasty focusing upon one side of his dialectic without regard for the sometimes implicit ideas that are not always as plain as many of us would like.

Brown regards Niebuhr as a "pessimistic optimist," one who combines in dialectic both negative and positive features. Clearly it is his anthropology that is the more systematically and explicitly presented, particularly in his early years, but this is in keeping with Niebuhr's emphasis upon theological ethics rather than systematic theology. Niebuhr never considered himself a systematic theologian, but a social ethicist. Later, his christology becomes more explicit and, although it by no means overshadows his anthropological thought, it provides in its proper dialectical frame of reference a corrective to the tendency to paint Niebuhr in more despairing tones than is appropriate. The tension that must be maintained between these two

doctrines merely reflects the balance between polar opposites intrinsic to the whole body of his thought.

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in his theological method itself: what he refers to as his "mythical method" of theological analysis and exposition which, grounded in the dialectical structure of his hermeneutics of myth, is reflected throughout his thought.

In order to demonstrate the appropriateness and the usefulness of interpreting Niebuhr from a thoroughgoing dialectical point of view, the second chapter will examine his understanding of myth and explicate the nature of his hermeneutic process. The two chapters that follow will describe how he uses this hermeneutic process to construct both his christology and anthropology in keeping with his dialectical method based upon the dialectical structure intrinsic to myth itself. The concluding chapter will critically address the issue of Niebuhr's contemporary significance and suggest a model for the overarching structure of his thought; it will also address the problematic implications of the nature of Niebuhr's dialectical approach and show how its problems have been avoided by other theologians.
CHAPTER TWO:
REINHOLD NIEBUHR'S HERMENEUTICS OF MYTH

According to Niebuhr, religion's contribution to morality is its "comprehension of the dimension of depth in life", a dimension which Niebuhr defines as "the contrast between the real and the ideal"—sin and grace—an important assumption not only for his ethical thought but for the hermeneutical underpinnings of all of his work, both theological and ethical. It is this "dimension of depth in the consciousness of religion" which "creates the tension between what is and what ought to be"; the distinction between the real and the ideal characterizes both God's relationship with the world and the is/ought dichotomy in ethics. As Niebuhr states,

the ethical fruitfulness of various types of religion is determined by the quality of their tension between the historical and the transcendent. This quality is measured by two considerations: The degree to which the transcendent truly transcends every value and achievement of history, so that no relative value of historical achievement may become the basis of moral complacency; and the degree to which the transcendent remains in organic contact with the historical, so that no degree of tension may rob the historical of its significance. The significance of the Hebrew-Christian religion lies in the fact that the tension between the ideal and the real which it creates can be maintained at any point in history, no matter what the moral and social achievement, because its ultimate ideal always transcends every historical fact and reality.

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3Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 5, 12.
In Niebuhr's interpretation, the ideal is organically related to the real, but also distinct from it; God, as "the Transcendent", is "involved in, but not identified with, the process of history."¹ There is a relationship of both continuity and distinction between the ideal and the real, the transcendent and the historical. This is Niebuhr's understanding of the fundamental meaning of the creation story.

To say that God is the creator is to use an image which transcends the canons of rationality, but which expresses both his organic relation to the world and his distinction from the world. To believe that God created the world is to feel that the world is a realm of meaning and coherence without insisting that the world is totally good or that the totality of things must be identified with the Sacred. The myth of the creator God is basic to Hebraic religion.²

It is solely through the character of myth that this paradoxical relationship of continuity and distinction is expressed and the tension between its elements created and maintained. The relationship between the ethical ideal and its real approximation parallels that of God's relationship to the world.

The ethic of Jesus is the perfect fruit of prophetic religion. Its ideal of love has the same relation to the facts and necessities of human experience as the God of prophetic faith has to the world. It is drawn from, and relevant to, every moral experience. It is immanent in life as God is immanent in the world. It transcends the possibilities of human life in its final pinnacle as God transcends the world.³

Both of these relationships reflects Niebuhr's understanding of the nature and structure of myth.

¹Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 13.  
²Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 16.  
³Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 22.
For Niebuhr, myths themselves are the product of "the childhood of every culture" when the prescientific imagination sought to explain the relationship between "the rich variety of facts and events in life and history" and "their relation to basic causes and ultimate meanings". This was done, however, without a careful examination of their relation to each other in the realm of natural causation. In this sense mythical thinking is simply prescientific thinking, which has not learned to analyse the relation of things to each other before fitting them into its picture of the whole. . . . But mythical thought is not only prescientific; it is also suprascientific. It deals with vertical aspects of reality which transcend the horizontal relationships which science analyses, charts and records. The classical myth refers to the transcendent source and end of existence without abstracting it from existence [that is, from history].

In this sense the myth alone is capable of picturing the world as a realm of coherence and meaning without defying the facts of incoherence. Its world is coherent because all facts in it are related to some central source of meaning, but is not rationally coherent because the myth is not under the abortive necessity of relating all things to each other in terms of immediate rational unity.\(^1\)

Mythical thinking, in Niebuhr's view, is "prescientific" in that it does not understand causal relationships with the scientific sophistication of modern times; the myths that Niebuhr is concerned with are the products of a more "primitive" society than ours. However, these stories of creation, fall, and redemption, contain a "suprascientific" element. There is an element in myth—the permanently valid truth in myth—that reaches beyond a mere description of causal relationships and declares meaning and purpose in human life and history, something science alone cannot do. Myth does this by describing in historical terms the ahistorical ground and end of human existence.

\(^1\)Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 15-16.
More contemporary thinkers concerning myth would share many features with Niebuhr while nonetheless differing significantly with him. For example, Joseph Campbell argues that myths are not merely the products of the "childhood" of cultures. They are products of every age of a living culture. In Campbell's view, myths are neither prescientific nor primitive; they are attempts to relate the science of the day to a culture's understanding of the meaning of life at that point in history.\(^1\) He would agree with Niebuhr, however, that there is a truth to live by in myths; but would not use Niebuhr's terminology to state it, nor would he assume so naively to translate the story-form of myths into the content of philosophical statements about life's meaning. Campbell argues that "there is no final system for the interpretation of myths, and there will never be any such thing."\(^2\)

More recent thinkers who concentrate upon myth, such as Mircea Eliade, Campbell, and Charles Long, would not be so quick to separate the literary form of myth from its philosophical content.

Niebuhr warns of the dangers of reducing myth into rational statements and then proceeds to do so without a sufficient appreciation for the multivalent character of myth. "Religious symbols are multivalent;"\(^3\) but Niebuhr seems to have little recognition of the difficulties inherent in their multivalency—a difficulty of which he was surely aware.

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Although Niebuhr's understanding reflects much of the contemporary thought about myth during his time, and he certainly represents an improvement over past thinking in this area, he ultimately fails to appreciate both the sophistication of so-called "primitive" cultures which generated the myths and the complexity of the problem of interpreting these myths. By modern standards Niebuhr's understanding of myth would be considered somewhat naive and condescending; for his time, nonetheless, Niebuhr was "onto something" and our more modern mythophiles work in some degree of continuity with those who influenced Niebuhr's thinking about myths and their interpretations.

Like so many of the terms he uses, Niebuhr never specifically defines "myth." He never says directly what it is, but, as seen in the above passage, at different points he does attempt to describe what it does. Probably his most clear and direct statement of this is also contained in An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, his first book to explicitly concentrate upon the meaning and use of the term "myth" and its consequent method. While discussing the relative vices and virtues of "rational non-mythical religions" with mythical ones, he states that

it is the virtue of mythical religions that they discover symbols of the transcendent in the actual without either separating the one from, or identifying it with, the other. This is perhaps the most essential genius of myth, that it points to the timeless in time, to the ideal in the actual, but does not lift the temporal to the category of the eternal (as pantheism does), nor deny the significant glimpses of the eternal and the ideal in the temporal (as dualism does). When the mythical method is applied to the description of human character, its paradoxes disclose precisely the same relationships in human personality which myth reveals, and more consistent philosophies obscure, in the nature of the universe. The quintessence of a human personality is never in
time or historic actuality. Yet it is the unifying principle in the whole welter of impulses which operate in the natural level.¹

Niebuhr separates myths (and the individual myth itself) into two categories or parts, "primitive" and "permanent". The "primitive" is "that part of mythology which is derived from "prescientific" thought, which does not understand the causal relations in the natural and historical world" and, consequently, "must naturally be sacrificed in a scientific age" as religion has "no right to insist upon the scientific accuracy of its mythical heritage", nor any right to insist upon the historical accuracy of myth.²

The genius of religious myth at its best is that it is trans-scientific. Its peril is to express itself in prescientific concepts and insist on their literal truth. If liberal religion had not admitted science (in the form of a critico-historical analysis of its sources) into the very heart of the church it would have been impossible to free what is eternal in the Christian religion from the shell of an outmoded culture in which it had become embedded.³

However, "there is a permanent as well as a primitive myth in every great mythical heritage" which "deals with aspects of reality which are suprascientific rather than prescientific" and should never be disavowed.

Niebuhr focuses first upon myths as in some sense "lies." They do not accurately reflect the causal relationships among things. Nevertheless, there is an enduring truth in myths which must be gleaned: the true content must be separated from the false form. Eliade, Campbell, and Long, however, take great pains to portray myths not as "lies" but as metaphors. Understood as

¹Reinhold Niebuhr, op. cit. pp. 50-51.
metaphorical stories, the hermeneutical procedure Niebuhr wishes to perform immediately becomes much more difficult. By concretely defining the content of myth, the story itself is destroyed and its meaning reduced.

Niebuhr's goal is to glean the abiding permanent truth in myth while rejecting the literal understanding of the primitive prescientific shell in which it is clothed, realizing at the time that this task is incapable of being completed as myths cannot be fully rationalized--the mystery cannot be fully explicated in non-mythical terms; content can be partially but not completely separated from form; "the rationalization of the mythos robs it of some of its significance."\(^1\)

Since myth cannot speak of the trans-historical without using symbols and events in history as its form of expression, it invariably falsifies the facts of history, as seen by science, to state its truth.... Every authentic religious myth contains paradoxes of the relation between the finite and the eternal which cannot be completely rationalized without destroying the genus of true religion. Metaphysics is therefore more dependent upon, and more perilous to, the truth in the original religious myth than is understood in a rationalistic and scientific culture.\(^2\)

The creation story depicts God acting in history to begin history; it is inconsistent or paradoxical to assert the eternal acting temporally, but despite this logical inconsistency, the non-literal metaphorical meaning of the assertion affirms the significance of the temporal--the eternal can be at

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least partially experienced (and only experienced) in the temporal. Niebuhr
asserts, in regard to the idea of an apocalyptic end of history, that

placing the final fulfillment at the end of time and not in a realm
above temporality is to remain true to the genius of prophetic religion
and to state mythically what cannot be stated rationally. If stated
rationally the world is divided between the temporal and the eternal
and only the eternal forms above the flux of temporality have
significance. To state the matter mythically is to do justice to the fact
that the eternal can only be fulfilled in the temporal. But since myth
is forced to state a paradoxical aspect of reality in terms of concepts
connoting historical sequence, it always leads to historical illusions....

Apocalypticism in terms of a specific interpretation of history may
thus be regarded as the consequence and not the cause of Jesus'
religion and ethic. The apocalypse is a mythical expression of the
impossible possibility under which all human life stands. The
Kingdom of God is always at hand in the sense that the impossibilities
are really possible, and lead to new actualities in given moments of
history. Nevertheless every actuality of history reveals itself, after
the event, as only an approximation of the ideal; and the Kingdom of
God is therefore not here. It is in fact always coming but never here.

The historical illusions which resulted inevitably from this
mythical statement of the situation in which the human spirit finds
itself do not destroy the truth in the myth; no more than the discovery
that the fall of man was not actual history destroys the mythical truth
in the story of the fall.¹

For Niebuhr, the most significant characteristic of myth is its illustration
of a "qualified dualism" between the eternal and the temporal, the ideal and
the real, whereby the former is understood as only being capable of
fulfillment in the latter--the eternal is only capable of fulfillment in the
temporal. By illustrating the eternal in terms of the real--the historical--the
meaning of history is affirmed while not lifting history to eternal significance
nor denying history any significance at all.

¹Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 35-36.
In Niebuhr's view, a myth is a prescientific symbolic story having an intrinsic dialectical or dual character. The nature of this dualism is qualified and not absolute such that there is both distinction and relationship between the ideal and real elements of the myth. There is an analogous relationship between the ideal/real elements so that the ideal content of the myth—the truth in the myth—is implied in the myth's literal form. Therefore, myths must be taken seriously (their inner symbolic truth must be taken seriously), but their outward form must not be understood to be literal historical truth despite the fact that the myth itself speaks in historical terms.

Niebuhr is certainly aware that for most of recorded history myths have been taken both seriously and literally—and he recognizes the power of this, particularly in the moral potency of a hope for a literal parousia. Nevertheless, we now live in a world where modern science compels us to abandon the literal truth of myths, yet ironically increases the human need for the permanently valid truth of myth which science can give us no grounds for accepting or rejecting. Niebuhr's interpretive method attempts to rescue these permanently valid truths while rejecting a literal understanding of the historical sequentiality in which myth must necessarily be framed.

Niebuhr wishes to separate the myth's meaning from its primitive literality while all the time recognizing the necessity for myth to speak in literal historical categories. If myth did not represent the eternal acting in the temporal, the value of the temporal would not be affirmed. Therefore, Niebuhr does not call for a total demythologization—he does not believe that the meaning of myth can be stated in entirely non-mythical terms—but for
an appreciation of the ideal content of myth which can never be fully
divorced from its historicizing form as the historical sequentiality of myth
(although it must not be taken literally) is necessary to the ideal content of
myth. Niebuhr seeks to translate story or literature into theological
statements—an enterprise more difficult than Niebuhr makes it out to be.

As stated earlier, it is in Niebuhr's 1935 book, *An Interpretation of
Christian Ethics*, that he begins to explicitly use what he terms a "mythical
method" of interpretation.¹ Despite his first use of the term here, his earlier
works are equally informed by the major presuppositions he now names and
applies to "myth". Unlike many of his practical pronouncements, the
philosophical underpinnings which structure Niebuhr's thought have
remained relatively stable and emerged almost fully formed (but not fully
elaborated) in his first book. This chapter attempts to explain his "mythical
method"—his hermeneutics of myth—by showing the presuppositions which
justify his use of such a method. By elaborating his understanding of myth
and now his understanding of the relationship between faith and reason, and
his idea of the impossible possibility, it will be seen that similar premises
asserting that a dialectical interpretation of reality does "more justice to the
facts" underlies all three and demonstrates the thoroughgoing dialectical
nature of Niebuhr's thought which expresses itself within his anthropology,
his christology, and in the relationship between these two. Niebuhr's
understanding of the nature and structure of myth is therefore a

¹Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 51.
hermeneutic strategy which determines the "style of his theological interpretation." 1

In Niebuhr's words:

all forms of religious faith are principles of interpretation which we use to organize our experience. Some religions may be adequate principles of interpretation at certain levels of experience, but they break down at deeper levels. No religious faith can maintain itself in defiance of the experience which it supposedly interprets. 2

Here Niebuhr seems to presuppose an ongoing relationship between religious faith and the critique that an examination of its applicability to human experience will bring. Niebuhr assumes that each form of religious faith has a "principle of interpretation". In Niebuhr's interpretation of Christianity this principle of interpretation is myth, or, as Niebuhr has stated earlier in his career, a dialectical relationship of "qualified dualism" between the ideal and the real, God and the world.

In interpreting any mass of data, certain organizational strategies must be chosen to organize and interpret the data appropriately—which necessarily limits, but does not contradict, the nature of the data itself. Niebuhr's organizational and interpretive strategy, his presupposition, his hermeneutical tool, is the dialectic—not a Hegelian dialectic as no synthesis ultimately results, but a dialectic which is, in Niebuhr's words, a "qualified dualism." Niebuhr understands Christianity as being characterized by a "tentative" or "qualified" dualism and sees Christianity's relationship to the world and numerous other relationships within Christianity in terms of a

dialectic which Niebuhr expresses using various pairs of terms.\(^1\) This is evident in his first book; later, he applies to myth the characteristics of “qualified dualism” which he earlier applied to Christianity without the service of the term “myth”.

In his first book, *Does Civilization Need Religion?* (1927), Niebuhr foreshadows to an amazing degree the substance and trajectory of his thought. Here many of his concerns receive their first elaborations which subsequent books will examine in detail. It’s clear that the dialectical structure of Niebuhr’s thought and many of his theological, ethical and political conclusions have been arrived at before—or in—the writing of this book. In this early work, Niebuhr’s theological and ethical thought is pervasively characterized by a form of dualism which expresses itself in many different polarities: the ideal and the real, the absolute and the relative, the transcendent and the historical, spirit and nature, to name a few. It is a *qualified* or a *relative* dualism in that the distinction between the two members is never total and absolute. There is similarity in the midst of their difference, but difference predominantes such that Niebuhr regards the most appropriate characterization of their relationship as a dualism rather than a monism. The ideal and the real are distinct, but the ideal is nonetheless implicit (and thus capable of partial, but not complete fulfillment) in and only in the real—alogously as the soul is incarnate, but not fully realized in the body.\(^2\)

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The "qualified dualism" which Niebuhr sees as an outstanding characteristic of Christianity is a feature of Niebuhr's own thought which he has expressed repeatedly in variations throughout his career, from its beginning to its end.\(^1\) However, "there is not a single dualism in life; rather there are many of them."\(^2\)

The pervasiveness of polarities in his thought and the multiplicity of dualities raises a question as to the appropriate "center" or "foundation" of his work. Given the pervasiveness of "qualified dualism" in Niebuhr's thought, his "center" must reflect this structure. Therefore, what is central must be dialectical. However, given the multiplicity of dualities in his thought, which one is central? Or are they all central as variations of each other which suggest and refer to one another? This uncertainty necessarily introduces an arbitrariness in the choice of a center. The most inclusive terms for understanding Niebuhr's "center" is the best option: the qualified dialectic between gospel and world. Niebuhr leaves us no choice in regarding the center of his thought to be dialectical in character, however, in naming the terms of this dialectic we impose our own agenda. The best approach is in choosing the terms "gospel and world" which suggest that the dyads which represent narrower fields are included at least partially within these more global terms.

In *Does Civilization Need Religion?* (1927), Niebuhr characterizes Christianity as having an intrinsic dualism which he contrasts with monistic pantheism.\(^3\) He regards pantheism as a danger to moral values "in

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\(^1\) Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 213.
\(^3\) Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 190.
practically all religions" and, for Niebuhr, the ability of religion to inspire human beings to ethical conduct is its greatest value.\(^1\) Pantheism's unqualified identification of God with the natural world leads either to a "morally enervating pessimism" or to a "sentimental optimism."\(^2\) In each case, human beings resign themselves to a divinely ordained fate, in the first instance a bitter one and, in the second, one more in line with our wishes. Given what Niebuhr sees as the "inevitable drift toward pantheism in Western thought,"\(^3\) a regeneration of the ethical life of Western society must depend... upon the revival of a religion in which the Scylla of pantheism and the Charybdis of pure naturalism are avoided... The only fruitful alternative to a monism and pantheism which identifies God and the world, the real and the ideal, is a dualism which maintains some kind of distinction between them and does not lose one in the other.\(^4\)

In contrast with both "naive dualism" and "absolute dualism", Niebuhr claims for Christianity a "tentative dualism", or, as he states later, a "qualified dualism."\(^5\)

An absolute dualism either between God and the universe or between man and nature, or spirit and matter, or good and evil, is neither possible nor necessary. What is important is that justice be done to the fact that creative purpose meets resistance in the world and that the ideal which is implicit in every reality is also in conflict with it. The reason why naive religions are "more inclusive of the facts" in portraying this struggle than highly elaborated theologies is that the latter are always prompted by the rational need of consistency to

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obscure some facts for the sake of developing an intellectual plausible unity.\(^1\)

Drawing upon Albert Schweitzer's *Christianity and Other World Religions* and Alfred North Whitehead's *Religion in the Making*, Niebuhr understands both early Hebrew religion, particularly the prophets, and the historical Jesus as being "naively dualistic"; they each emphasized the moral rather than the metaphysical attributes of God in such a way as to develop a practical and morally potent distinction between God and the universe, between the ideal of religious devotion and the disappointing realities of life.\(^2\)

Their dualism is more dramatic than metaphysical, but nonetheless, according to Whitehead whom Niebuhr quotes with approval, Christianity is "more inclusive of the facts" than a neat metaphysical system which, by the fact of its systematization, necessarily "oversimplifies its expression of the world."\(^3\)

Niebuhr asserts that

in the early Christian church the naive dualism of Jesus was given dramatic and dynamic force through his deification, so that he became, in a sense, the God of the ideal, the symbol of the redemptive force in life which is in conflict with evil. Since no clear distinction was made between the spirit of the living Christ and the indwelling Holy Ghost, the doctrine of the trinity was, in effect, a symbol of an essential dualism.\(^4\)

Religious faith needs specific symbols; and the Jesus of history is a perfect symbol of the absolute in history, because the perfect love to which pure spirit aspires is vividly realized in the drama of his life and cross. Thus a man becomes the symbol of God, and the religious

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\(^1\)Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 200  
\(^2\)Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 197  
\(^3\)Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 198  
\(^4\)Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 198
sense that the absolute invades the relative and the historical is adequately expressed.¹

Despite the lack of "philosophical precision", Christianity's symbols forcefully portrayed the "idea of a conflict between evil and the redemptive and creative force in life", thus fulfilling the "two great functions of religion in prompting men to repent of their sins, and in encouraging them to hope for redemption from them."²

Niebuhr recognizes the necessity for religion to be grounded in metaphysics, but believes that ethics and metaphysics are always in some degree of opposition such that one must be chosen above the other. Niebuhr opts--as he believes Jesus did--for the ethical over the metaphysical, thus losing some logical consistency, but gaining in moral vigor.

Niebuhr asserts that "religion ... needs the support of both metaphysics and ethics" and that the ethics of a religion "is dependent upon its metaphysics and its metaphysics is rooted in its ethics"--a mutually determinative circular relationship.³ Nonetheless, ethical power is valued more highly than philosophical consistency. Speaking of the personification of evil in the form of the serpent or of Satan, Niebuhr says

it may be metaphysically inconsistent to have two absolutes, one good and one evil, but the conception provides at least for a dramatic portrayal of the conflict which disturbs the harmonies and unities of the universe, and therefore, it has a practical and ethical value .... In the cosmic order the conflict is between creativity and the resistance which frustrates creative purpose. Whether the dualism is defined as

³Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 6, 7.
one of mind and matter, or thought and extension, or force and inertia, or God and the devil, it approximates the real facts of life. It may be impossible to do full justice to the two types of facts by any set of symbols or definitions; but life gives the lie to any attempt by which one is explained completely in terms of the other.\footnote{Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 197-210.}

Niebuhr’s concern is clearly with the moral outcome of “religious and philosophical ideas rather than in their perfect consistency.”\footnote{Niebuhr, op. cit., p 210.} He concludes that ultimately some choice must be made between the adequacy of moral power and philosophical consistency.

It is manifestly necessary to have some metaphysical basis for religious conviction, for there is no spiritual vigor in the conscious self-deception of purely subjective religions. But it is not necessary to limit religion to the bare concepts which science establishes. It is in fact better for religion to forego perfect metaphysical consistency for the sake of moral potency. In a sense 	extit{religion is always forced to choose between an adequate metaphysics and an adequate ethics}. That is not to say that the two interests are incompatible but that they are not identical. When there is a conflict between them it is better to leave the metaphysical problem with some loose ends than to develop a religion which is inimical to moral values. The reason why naive religions have frequently been morally more potent than highly rationalized ones is not because the faith which gave them moral fervor was necessarily inconsistent with the facts, but because they based their affirmations upon facts and experiences which were inconsistent with each other or seemed to be but were equally true and equally necessary for the maintenance of moral and spiritual energy.\footnote{Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 214-215 (my italics).}

Later, in a similar vein, he says

it is tremendously difficult, without the paradoxes of religion, to escape estimates of human nature which betray into absurdity by their consistency. Man is either good or bad, life is either sublime or not worth living, the universe is either man’s friend or his enemy, according to the philosophies. In the insights of the Christian religion
and in the poetic symbolism of all true religion, man is first driven to
despair by the knowledge of his sins and then encouraged by the hope
that redemption is possible for him. He finds life tragic but also worth
living, because he beholds the beauty in the tragedy. In the universe
he discovers both God and the devil, both friendly and unfriendly
forces. The same God whom the religious devotee worships as
omnipotent is not sufficiently powerful to overcome the devil, except
in "the last days." There is always a note of absurdity in these
paradoxes of religion, but the wise man will choose them in preference
to the absurdities into which he is betrayed by the emphasis on the
logical consistency of rational thought.1

Niebuhr opts for the paradoxical as he believes it more accurately
describes the complexity of the facts of human existence than a more
logically consistent system. He believes a choice must be made between
"truth" or a logically consistent "method" and decides in favor of the former.
It is the paradox of qualified duality which is true—as a description of
human existence, as a picture of God’s relationship with the world, as the
structure of myth.

Niebuhr’s interpretation of the relationship between faith and reason also
illustrates this paradox of qualified duality. For him, faith represents the
ultrarational, the absolute, the ideal, the mythical, which always contains
something of the irrational, but without which the opposite pole, reason
itself, could not function: "reason can operate only after certain ultrarational
presuppositions have been made."2 Thus, faith has chronological or lexical
priority over reason, for "religion must create its values in naive faith and
[then] subject their limitations to a critical intelligence."3 Without the

1Reinhold Niebuhr, The Contribution of Religion to Social Work (New York:
2Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 69.
3Reinhold Niebuhr, Does Civilization Need Religion? A Study in the Social
Resources and Limitations of Religion in Modern Life (New York: The
Macmillan Company, 1927) 123.
mythological presuppositions of faith, the "critical intelligence" cannot work, as Niebuhr later states: "an adequate philosophy of history must . . . be a mythology rather than a philosophy. . . . [as] meaning can be attributed to history only by a mythology." 1

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 . . . . Reason cannot function without the presuppositions of faith . . . . Every search for truth begins with a presupposition of faith. 2

However, reason can provide the basis upon which the necessity for faith may be seen, but this is discovered in reason's inability to do what only faith (through myth) can: declare the universe, and life itself, meaningful. Science can explore the causal relationships between phenomena, but can never declare the universe as a whole to be meaningful--that is a mythological statement. Thus, "in so far as it is impossible to live at all without presupposing a meaningful existence, the life of every person is religious." 3

Faith itself is hypothetical and of such a nature that it can never be "proved" to those who reject faith nor disproved to those who have felt it validated in their own inner experience. That is the character of religious faith; it must remain ultrarational to the end, because it makes the world that is external to man relevant to his enterprise, an absurdity according to every canon

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of pure rationality, but an absurdity which has in it the root of ultimate wisdom, and which is perpetrated by many unconsciously, even while they disavow it.\(^1\)

Niebuhr conceives the relationship between faith and reason as a "both/and" rather than an "either/or" relationship. Both members of the dialectic are affirmed as "there is no final choice between reason and religion. There are too may virtues and too many vices in the camp of each."\(^2\)

The assumption upon which religion proceeds is not scientific . . . . Nor is religion always as ready as it ought to be, to borrow resources from science. But it is not impossible to unite the insights of religion of a high type with the knowledge which science imparts.\(^3\)

Niebuhr's example \textit{par excellence} of a "high type" of religion is Christianity itself. Therefore, for the Christian, faith and reason, as members of a dialectic are complementary rather than contradictory. It is a mutually determinative relationship. Once reason has begun to function, it critiques the assumptions of faith which, following Niebuhr's logic, necessarily produces a new critical faith which in turn must subject itself to the critique of reason. Faith and reason thus form a hermeneutical circle which, in spite of the fact that the circle must be entered through faith, is never divorced from reason. Their relationship may best be described as circular as there is no simple linear direction of cause and effect. "Faith must feed on reason (Unamuno). But reason must also feed on faith."\(^4\)

\(^2\)Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 58.
\(^3\)Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 63, 65.
\(^4\)Reinhold Niebuhr, \textit{An Interpretation of Christian Ethics} (New York, Harper and Brothers, 1979) 8.
Even as Niebuhr's understanding of the relationship between faith and reason reflects a dialectical relationship of "qualified dualism", his idea of the moral ideal of the "impossible possibility" reflects this same structure—even in the oxymoronic nature of the term itself. As stated earlier, Niebuhr sees "the distinctive contribution of religion to morality" to lie "in its comprehension of the dimension of depth in life." Niebuhr regards Protestant Christianity as being shallow: "liberal Christianity" by falsely sanctifying our transient modern cultural standards as the ethic of Jesus and "orthodox Christianity" by operating with truths imbedded in an obsolete science and a morality of "dogmatic and authoritarian" laws. The ethical richness of a religion is dependent upon the quality of the tension it holds between the transcendent and the immanent in history. While liberal Christianity has mistaken our relative modern culture for the ultimately transcendent, orthodox Christianity has equated primitive moral codes and the literal interpretation of myth with ultimate transcendence. Both have lost the tension between the truly transcendent and the immanent in history. Niebuhr sees a reinterpretation of the prophetic mythical basis of Christianity as the way out of our shallowness and the basis of an independent Christian ethic.

Rather than a mystical religion of culture, Niebuhr sees Christianity as a mythical religion of revelation based upon a prophetic tradition—a dichotomy no longer used in Biblical studies. Where "rational mystical religion" worships a God who is transcendent, but not immanent in history, "mythical religion" is capable of maintaining the quality of tension between

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1Niebuhr, op cit, pp 2-3.
the transcendent and history and affirm the significance of both; something that modern culture and Protestant Christianity in its undue dependence upon modern culture is unable to do. "The classical myth refers to the transcendent and end of existence without abstracting it from existence." In order to be independent of modern culture and yet affirm the significance of human history while having the ultimately transcendent as its central source of meaning, the Christian ethic must have a mythical basis.

The ethic of Jesus, the uncompromising law of love, is mythical and thus able to hold in tension the ultimately transcendent and the immanent in history. The ideal of love is an "impossible possibility," as transcendent as God transcends the world and as "immanent as God is immanent in the world."¹ It is a humanly unrealizable goal and yet, speaks to every moral experience, challenging every achievement to the criticism of its perfection. The idea of the "impossible possibility" reflects the same mythical structure as the Hebrew tradition's understanding of God's relation to the world.

However, due to the limitations intrinsic to myth, as it must state a paradoxical aspect of reality in concepts implying temporal order, "it always leads to historical illusions." An apocalyptic interpretation of history is the consequence of the mythical expression of the impossible possibility under which all human life stands."² Christians are faced with the tasks of altering our world for the better in terms of possibilities and always criticizing those possibilities in the light of the "impossible possibility" of the ultimate ideal of perfect love.

¹Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 22.
²Niebuhr, op cit., p. 36.
What is it that makes the possibility of the fulfillment of the ethic of love impossible? Niebuhr interprets the myth of the fall to be an explication of the quality of existence, the nature of the inevitability of human sinfulness.

The particular virtue of the myth of the Fall is that it does justice to the paradoxical relation of spirit and nature in human evil . . . . Sin is not necessary, but yet, inevitable. Sin is human rebellion against God. Evil . . . is not the absence but the corruption of the good; yet, it is parasitic on the good . . . . Original sin is not an inherited corruption, but it is an inevitable fact of human existence, the inevitability of which is given by the nature of man’s spirituality. It is true in every moment of existence, but it has no history.¹

We are sinners through human responsibility, through rebellion against God, not as a condition of our finitude. The idea of the temptation by the serpent tempers human responsibility somewhat by suggesting that the principle of evil precedes human existence. The myth also suggests that evil is a corruption of the good. The fact of sin is not necessary, but is nonetheless inevitable and is the limiting factor that prevents us from realizing the fulfillment of Jesus’ ethic of love. The unfulfillable ethic of love serves to increase our consciousness of sin, not only as individual guilt, but as religious guilt, the realization that we share the guilt of sinful structures which we are part of, but have little or no control over. The pessimistic realism of the doctrine of original sin forms a tension within prophetic Christianity with the “impossible possibility” of the love ethic of Jesus. The awareness of this tension helps to guard Christianity against sentimental optimism and mystical other-worldly pessimism.

genius and the task of prophetic religion to insist on the organic relation between historic human existence and that which is both the ground and the fulfillment of this existence, the transcendent.¹ Jesus' ethic of love is beyond human reach while maintaining a relationship to every moral act—it is the ideal within the real. As moral standards are raised, the relationship between the ethical ideal and the human approximation to it becomes more and more obvious, not only in the area of distributive justice, but in corrective justice as well. The law of love is a universal criterion whereby all human approximations are seen for what they are: attempts toward realizing a transcendent law beyond our capacity to fulfill. Every moral act stands in relationship to this law, points toward the law and is also convicted by it. The law is not capable of complete fulfillment but neither is it irrelevant in history as it is implied in every moral decision on individual and group levels. It is the transcendent within the historical leading us "toward a more transcendent source of unity than any discoverable in the natural world."²

Applied in the realm of ethics, Niebuhr's thinking leads to a variety of what has been called "act deontology"³ wherein the responsible agent's duty is to consider all of the relevant features of possible actions and choose the feasible action which is most in keeping with the character of the "impossible possibility."

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¹Niebuhr, op. cit., p 63
²Niebuhr, op. cit., p 69.
The term "impossible possibility" itself is the perfect example of the presuppositions of Niebuhr's hermeneutics of myth. The impossible is incarnate within the possible, yet never fully realized, thus the impossible serves as both the goal which the possible is directed toward and as the standard by which the possible is judged. The impossible is made real only in history, but never fully--it is capable of only partial historical realization.

Despite the limitations of myth, Niebuhr regards it as the only thing which can hold in tension the transcendent and historical in such a profound manner as to do justice to the realities of human existence. He wishes to reinterpret myth without destroying its power to speak to us deeply.

Faith and reason, the impossible possibility, Niebuhr's understanding of myth, all illustrate the nature of Niebuhr's interpretative method which assumes a qualified dualism which is most accurately understood as a dialectic between the ideal and the real. Niebuhr speaks of the truth in myths, not the truth of myths. This truth must be excerpted from myth by rationalizing its meaning in non-mythical terms--a process which never exhausts the myth of the mystery of which it speaks. Nonetheless, Niebuhr's hermeneutics of myth demythologizes.

Niebuhr's interpretive process presupposes a dialectical relationship of "qualified dualism" between ideal and real elements in which there is both continuity and distinction such that the ideal element can only be manifested in the real. However, depicting the ideal in the real--the eternal in the temporal--necessarily leads to distortions which Niebuhr terms "historical illusions." Therefore, the truth in the myths of creation, fall, and redemption are to be taken "seriously, but not literally." They are not literal historical narratives, but history-like depictions of permanently valid truths.
about human existence. But although their prescientific acceptance as literal
history must be rejected and separated from their ideal permanently valid
elements, this cannot wholly be done—and should not be done. Myth's
depiction of the eternal acting in the temporal declares history as having
meaning without elevating history itself to eternal significance. To totally
demythologize myth would rob it of the dialectical tension it maintains
between the eternal and the temporal, and, according to Niebuhr, would
inevitably result in either some form of pantheism or an absolute dualism.

It is this "mythical method" of interpretation—as he calls it—which
Niebuhr applies to the stories of creation, fall, and redemption, consequently
building his anthropology and christology. His conclusions within these
disciplines reflect the presuppositions of his hermeneutics of myth. And the
relationship between his anthropology and christology also reflect the
dialectical relationship of qualified dualism presupposed in Niebuhr's
hermeneutical strategy. Christology is related to anthropology in the same
manner as the ideal and the real in Niebuhr's view of the relationship
between faith and reason, the "impossible possibility", and the nature and
basic structure of myth.

Neither the position of Wolf and Hofmann (that anthropology is
foundational) nor the position of Lehmann and Harland (christology is
central) is consistent with Niebuhr's hermeneutics of myth. If Niebuhr's
hermeneutic strategy is applied consistently (as he seems to do), both the
interior structure of each and the interrelationship between Niebuhr's
christology and anthropology is most appropriately understood as a dialectic
characterized by qualified dualism which mirrors and suggests Niebuhr's
analysis of myth.
CHAPTER THREE: NIEBUHR'S CHRISTOLOGY

In contrast to his foils of "liberalism" and "orthodoxy," Reinhold Niebuhr interprets the meaning and significance of Jesus Christ in a third fashion that critically combines the earlier two approaches. In Niebuhr's attempt to answer the question of Christ's contemporary significance, he makes clear his primary understanding of Jesus Christ as the symbolic embodiment of the eternal ideal under the conditions of finitude, interpreting the story of Jesus as a profound myth. His hermeneutics of myth results in a "symbolic christology" which, in comparison to contemporaries such as Karl Barth, is "a very low Christology indeed."¹

Niebuhr's attempt to take "the Christ myth" "seriously but not literally"² yields a christology which accepts only the humanity of the "Jesus of history" yet proclaims the transcendent ethical and religious value of the "Christ of faith." With this in mind, it is clear that Niebuhr's christology is not "orthodox" in the traditional sense, but, neither is it correctly labeled "liberal." Unlike the more literalistic interpretations of Jesus, Niebuhr's christology is capable of facing squarely and integrating a scientific world view; but in contrast to the liberal tradition, this scientific world view does not come to occupy the position Niebuhr accords the symbolic truth of myth. Despite the scientific advances of the Enlightenment and the years that have followed, Niebuhr's christology suggests that not only does civilization need

religion, but that religious truth is the *sine qua non* of human life: it alone may pronounce life meaningful.

Reinhold Niebuhr bases his thought upon his interpretation of the Christian cycle of mythic stories: creation, fall, and redemption. His understanding of God's relationship to the world is largely derived, like the mainstream of Christian thought, from an interpretation of the creation story contained in the book of Genesis. His anthropology, too, is ultimately based upon an interpretation of the Genesis story of the fall—of course in both cases under the influence of intervening centuries of religious tradition; most significantly the Reformation interpretation of Pauline tradition. Niebuhr's interpretation of "the Christ myth", the myth of redemption, completes the cycle of myths.

Niebuhr's christology is an explication of the Christian myth of redemption using his hermeneutics of myth whereby he attempts to show the eternally valid ideal elements within the myth which are embedded within and cannot be wholly separated from its "prescientific" elements—the historical temporality in which myths are framed may neither be regarded as meaningless nor accepted as literal.

For Niebuhr, the salient element of his christology is Christ as the symbol of essential humanity under the conditions of finitude; Christ is the embodiment of the "impossible possibility" in history, the character of Adam before the fall. Christ is the ideal and essential character of all human beings; He is the ideal within the real, the eternal within the historical. The Pauline symbol of Christ as the second Adam suggests that Christ's character is both the essential ground of human personality (the purity of being before the act) and the proper goal of our becoming. Since the impossible
possibility cannot be fulfilled in history, the symbols of incarnation, the two natures of Christ, the second Adam, atonement, resurrection, must all be taken as mythical—not referring to literal historical qualities subject to metaphysical analysis (to do so would necessarily involve us in logical contradictions), but referring to permanently valid truths about the nature of our humanity.

The overall character of Niebuhr's thought in general and his christology in particular is determined by his hermeneutics of myth which makes it possible for Niebuhr to forge a third option between orthodoxy and liberalism. It is his mythical method itself that provides the key to Niebuhr's thought—every facet of his thinking bears the stamp of his interpretative method.

The outstanding examination of Niebuhr's christology is Paul Lehmann's "The Christology of Reinhold Niebuhr." In this article, Lehmann interprets the general character of (and argues for) three basic points characterizing Niebuhr's christological thought.

First, Lehmann argues that christology is not a peripheral concern of Niebuhr's, but the "central" and "pivotal" point of his thinking suggesting that it is alone the "fulcrum" of his thought and the key to it.

Regarding this first point, Lehmann is correct in asserting the centrality of Niebuhr's christological concern, but is wrong to suggest that christology alone is central. In keeping with Niebuhr's hermeneutics of myth, what is central must be dialectical and (whether this dialectic is expressed as God/world, ideal/real, or christology/anthropology) it is the dialectic itself which is central or foundational and not merely one of its members. To
assert the centrality of only one member of the dialectic fails to do justice to the complexity of Niebuhr's position.

Lehmann's second point is that Niebuhr's christological thought is more implicit than explicit. Few would disagree with Lehmann's contention that the reader must search in vain for a systematic treatment on Niebuhr's part of christological issues—in trying to put together a systematic treatment of Niebuhr's christological thought it's necessary to go from book to book gathering up the fragments and trying to fit them into a whole—but certainly, since Niebuhr is a theological ethicist, those issues are there despite unsystematic treatment, as Lehmann points out.

His third point is that Niebuhr's christology is "reverse, not regular."

In common with the [liberal] theological trend of the nineteenth century, Niebuhr reverses the direction of orthodox Christology, which characteristically moved from a consideration of Christ's person to an exposition of his saving work. But as Niebuhr's thought develops, he reverses the Christological orientation of theological liberalism. The theology of the nineteenth century abandoned the orthodox distinction between the person and work of Christ as a scholastic construct and concentrated upon what in the tradition had been called "the work of Christ." It is the "Jesus of history" rather than the "Christ of faith" who is the object of theological investigation. Niebuhr without surrendering the "Jesus of history" and without returning to a scholastic Christological scheme, nevertheless comes at the end to the view that Jesus' relation to God is the basis of and the key to Jesus' historical significance.... the proper understanding of the "Jesus of history" must presuppose not precede the apprehension of the heights and depths of the Christian faith.

It is this reverse aspect of Niebuhr's Christology which is the key to it. His thought moves from the Christus in nobis to the Christus pro nobis [from the "Christ of faith" to the "Jesus of history"]; and only in the light of the latter does the Christological significance of what has preceded become plain.1

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1Lehmann, op. cit., pp. 331-332.
Implicit in this third point is the vital flaw of Lehmann's article whereby he misrepresents the general character of Niebuhr's christology. Lehmann sees a relatively close reciprocal relationship between Niebuhr's "Christ of faith" and the "Jesus of history" which leads Lehmann to hedge upon Niebuhr's own dictum that "Biblical symbols" must be taken "seriously but not literally."\(^1\) Consequently, Lehmann suggests that Niebuhr's christology is much higher than commonly supposed and implies that Niebuhr has a more orthodox and "evangelical" christology upon examination than usually thought. Niebuhr's hermeneutics of myth necessarily focuses almost exclusively upon the "Christ of faith" who, unlike the "Jesus of history", is identical with the Christ of myth. The "Jesus of history" is dealt with only so far as to say that he, in some sense, "caused" the "Christ of faith and that even without the superstructure of myth built upon him, he represents "the most perfect personality we know."\(^2\) At no point does Niebuhr step outside the framework of myth and symbol to make literal metaphysical postulations relating the "Jesus of history" and the "Christ of faith". In fact, if there were no "Jesus of history", Niebuhr's christology would suffer little so long as the Christ myth still asserted Him to be a real historical person.

Niebuhr's position is more subtle than Lehmann makes it out to be. Niebuhr combines in his christological thinking "low" elements from liberalism and "high" elements of orthodox thought. In applying his mythical method he attempts to correct what he understands as "liberalism" and

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"orthodoxy." He is the inheritor of the tradition of both and seeks to correct both. He is not a liberal in the sense in which Ae understands liberalism, but neither is he accurately described as orthodox as "his orthodoxy, as has been well noted, is very unorthodox indeed."¹ In Niebuhr's thinking, his hermeneutics of myth allows him to integrate the insights of both liberalism and orthodoxy without the pitfalls of either.

From Niebuhr's point of view theological liberalism is practically synonymous with cultural liberalism in that both have rejected the transcendent for the immanent, giving the historical unqualified significance and conforming religion to culture. Liberalism has abandoned the "Christ of faith" in favor of a fruitless quest for the "Jesus of history". As Daniel D. Williams notes,

Niebuhr sees liberal Christianity as having very close connections with liberal culture . . . . Liberal culture is essentially the spirit and outlook of the middle classes in the modern period. It is a phenomenon of the ascendancy of the bourgeois. The most characteristic idea of the liberal is his faith in historical progress. The values which are usually placed foremost as criteria of progress are individual freedom and the practice of tolerance . . . .

Niebuhr sees liberal Christianity as a phase of this cultural liberalism. He says, "Christian liberalism is spiritually dependent upon bourgeois liberalism and is completely lost when its neat evolutionary process toward an ethical historical goal is suddenly engulfed in social catastrophe."² The liberal faith is the child of the age of reason, and Thomas Jefferson is one of its most characteristic prophets.³

Liberalism, both cultural and theological, places its faith in "historical progress" based upon an "erroneous view of human nature." Jesus becomes merely a great moral teacher and the Kingdom of God will come in history as education and morality progress.¹

Despite its rejection of the transcendent in history, liberalism is not without virtue. Being the product of the age of science and reason, it brings the benefit of both into the sphere of ethics and religion. As Williams interprets Niebuhr,

Christian liberalism rightfully used scientific reason to destroy crude supernaturalism in the understanding of nature. Science discloses a realm of law in the processes of nature, and theology must respect this aspect of the truth in its doctrine of God’s action. Liberalism applied the scientific historical method to the records of Christian origins. This was necessary as a criticism of pre-scientific supernaturalism, and it had important ethical results. It saved the Christian mind from the error of making an inflexible and infallible law out of the historically conditioned precepts in the Biblical record. Thus liberalism recognized the law of love as the final norm for Christian ethics; and it made possible in principle the criticism of every historical dogma and ethical system. Niebuhr’s own critical method in theology which allows him to reject the absolutizing of any single theological doctrine is certainly in the liberal spirit, even though his ultimate presuppositions about Christian knowledge look for truth beyond the realm of rational intelligibility.²

It is the influence of theological liberalism that leads Niebuhr to reject the literalism of orthodoxy, but it is orthodoxy’s appreciation for the transcendent revealed in the historical which leads him to reject liberalism and to take biblical myths seriously, that is, to regard the perennially valid insights of religious myth with the reverence due symbolic truth. Through

¹Williams, op. cit., p. 274
²Williams, op. cit., p. 279
the insights of liberalism he rejects the literalism of orthodoxy yet holds onto the symbolic truth contained in the Christ myth.

If we interpret Niebuhr's christology by emphasizing his refusal to take myth literally we conclude that his is a very low christology whose focus is upon the humanity of Jesus. But if we emphasize his decision to take what he understands to be the symbolic meaning of myth seriously, his christology appears much higher and, at least as a symbol, affirms the unity of Father and Son.

In the case of Niebuhr's christology, "low" and "high" refer to different aspects. From the point of view of the literalism of orthodoxy (as Niebuhr understood it), his christology is very low, but from the vantage point of the liberalism he criticized--at least in regard to the symbolic truth it proclaims--Niebuhr's christology is as high as any orthodox christology. An excerpt from Faith and History will serve as an example of his rejection of literalism integrated with his affirmation of the symbolic truth of the literal religious assertions made by orthodoxy:

The idea of the divine creation of the world, which, when taken profoundly, describes the limits of the world's rationality and the inadequacy of any "natural" cause as a sufficient explanation for the irrational givenness of things, is frequently corrupted into a theory of secondary causation and thereby comes in conflict with a valid scientific account of causation on the natural level. This corruption of religion into a bad science has aroused the justified protest of a scientific age. It also helped to tempt science to become a bad religion by offering natural causation as an adequate principle of ultimate coherence.

Theological literalism also corrupts the difficult eschatological symbols of the Christian faith. In these the fulfillment of life is rightly presented, not as a negation but as a transfiguration of historical reality. If they are regarded as descriptions of a particular end in time, the real point of the eschatological symbol is lost. It ceases to
symbolize both the end and the fulfillment of time, or to point to both
the limit and the significance of historical development as the bearer
of the meaning of life.

In the same manner a symbolic historical event, such as the "fall"
of man, loses its real meaning when taken as literal history. It
symbolizes an inevitable and yet not a natural corruption of human
freedom. It must not, therefore, be regarded either as a specific event
with which evil begins in history nor yet as a symbol of the modern
conception of evil as the lag of nature and finiteness.

In a similar fashion the affirmation of the Christian faith that the
climax of the divine self-revelation is reached in a particular person
and a particular drama of his life, in which these particular events
become revelatory of the meaning of the whole of life, is falsely
rationalized so that the Jesus of history who is known as the Christ by
faith, is interpreted as an inhuman and incredible personality with
alleged powers of omniscience within the conditions of finiteness. In
this way the ultimate truth about God and His relation to men, which
can be appropriated only in repentance and faith, is made into a "fact"
of history.

These errors of a literalistic orthodoxy tend to obscure the real
issues between Christianity and modern culture as surely as the
premature capitulation of liberal Christianity to modern culture. The
Christian truth is presented as a "dated" bit of religious fantasy which
is credible only to the credulous and which may be easily dismissed
by modern man.....

The truth of the Christian Gospel does not lie in the false absolutes
with which fundamentalism seeks to defy the indubitble fact that
both nature and human history are in process. Yet there is a
perennially valid truth in the Gospel which clarifies a perennial
human predicament and may redeem man from the constant tendency
to aggravate his predicament by false efforts to escape from it.1

The value of Niebuhr's christology lies in its ability to affirm the
permanently valid symbolic truths of the literalized orthodox
pronouncements about Christ while rejecting the concretized literalization of
those truths. It is an interpretation of Jesus Christ in which the empirical
truth of modern science (appropriated by liberalism) and the symbolic truth

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1Reinhold Niebuhr, Faith and History: a Comparison of Christian and Modern Views
of myth (concretized by orthodoxy) meet and complement one another. In Niebuhr's hermeneutics of myth, reason as understood by the modern scientific mentality is married to a modern understanding of the symbolic truth of faith: science and art are thus joined.

Niebuhr approaches the story of Jesus from liberalism's acceptance of the standpoint of twentieth century science. He accepts the validity and value of scientific empirical research and the scientific method itself, but rejects what he regards as the presumptuous attitude of some scientists who regard the scientific method as the path to the discovery of how human life should be lived. The ideal life, the moral life, the meaningful life can only be examined and determined on the basis of a transcendent source of value. For Niebuhr, an appreciation of the mythical truth of the story of Jesus Christ is this source of value.

The symbol of Jesus as the realization of the impossible possibility is the absolute standard--absolute for those who embrace this standard--whereby Niebuhr bridges the gap between the "is" and the "ought" relative to that standard. Niebuhr implicitly accepts Hume's subjectivism; but, from Niebuhr's viewpoint, a subjective relative standard embraced as an absolute, from the existential standpoint of those who embrace this standard, this relative standard is an absolute.

In interpreting the Christ myth according to his mythical method, as discussed earlier, he presupposes the existence of both "prescientific" and permanently valid elements in the myth. Those elements in the story of Jesus which, if taken literally, contradict the findings of modern science must be rejected. This premise is what Fox regards--with partial accuracy--as Niebuhr's "thoroughgoing naturalism."
Niebuhr does accept the conclusions modern science has reached regarding natural causation and would consequently deny that these laws are interrupted in miraculous fashion. Nevertheless, he would deny also that meaning could be found in human life by that same empirical method. The meaning of life, like the meaning of history is found on the basis of faith—the acceptance of the symbolic truth of a mythology which asserts life’s meaning on ultrarational grounds.

In keeping with what Niebuhr calls "Biblical realism", he rejects most of the miraculous claims of the biblical narratives of Jesus. His appreciation for natural causality leads him to reject a literal interpretation of the virgin birth and the physical resurrection of Jesus. He regards the healing stories, however, as probably having some historical basis on the grounds of modern research into psychosomatic illness. The virgin birth and the resurrection of Jesus, like all religious symbols, have value not as the recounting of historical events, but as having permanently valid elements of meaning which transcend the literalness in which they are recounted.¹

The rejection of a literal interpretation of Jesus' resurrection is of greater consequence than the rejection of virgin birth and has been a consistent feature of Niebuhr's thought. He regards the resurrection and the virgin birth as symbols having completely different characters. The resurrection is rich in meaning whereas the assertion of a virgin birth attempts merely to support the Christian assertion of Christ's uniqueness by appealing to miracle. "A faith not quite sure of itself always hopes to suppress its skepticism by establishing the revelatory depth of a fact through its

miraculous character. This type of miracle is in opposition to true faith."¹
In contrast to the virgin birth, "the belief in the resurrection is itself a
miracle of a different order . . . . It is the miracle of recognizing the triumph
of God's sovereignty in what seem to be very ambiguous facts of history."²

Niebuhr's rejection of Jesus' physical resurrection also means a disavowal
of belief in personal immortality, as Fox points out. Niebuhr deals directly
with these issues for the first time in Beyond Tragedy in the sermonic essay
entitled "The Fulfillment of Life." He returns to these issues again in The
Nature and Destiny of Man and also in Christian Realism and Political
Problems.

Consistently applying his premise, he also rejects a literal understanding
of incarnation and declares the doctrine of Christ's two natures, if taken
literally, to verge upon "logical nonsense."³

His use of his mythical method to integrate qualified features of
liberalism and orthodoxy expressed in his rejection of literal interpretations
in favor of symbolic ones constitute the general character of Niebuhr's
christology. How he applies this method to the interpretations of traditional
doctrines concerning Christ (such as the virgin birth, incarnation, the two
natures of Christ, the atonement, Christ's sinlessness, the bodily resurrection,
and the parousia or second coming) constitutes the specific character of his
christology.

²Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 148.
Niebuhr's treatment in *Beyond Tragedy* of the idea of bodily resurrection serves as a model for his reinterpretation of both Christ's bodily resurrection and of other features of traditional orthodox christology.

He begins by rejecting out of hand a literal interpretation of bodily resurrection:

the idea of the resurrection of the body can of course not be literally true. But neither is any other idea of fulfillment literally true. All of them use symbols of our present existence to express conceptions of a completion of life which transcends our present existence.¹

Here is Niebuhr's rejection of the literal understanding of "prescientific" elements of myth--literal resurrection is rejected on the implied ground that it contradicts what we know to be scientifically true of human life and death: in the words of Flannery O'Connor's anti-hero Hazel Motes, "the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way."² Of course, unlike the fictional Hazel Motes, Niebuhr argues that in another more profound sense all these things do happen and are the bearers of a truth capable of transforming our lives.

Despite his rejection of a literal interpretation, Niebuhr asserts that "there can be no question that the dominant idea of the Bible in regard to the ultimate fulfillment of life is expressed in the conception of the [bodily] resurrection" and not in the idea of the immortality of a discarnate soul--an equally inconceivable idea if taken literally.³

If the literal meaning is to be rejected, what is the meaning of an assertion of bodily resurrection both for the historical Jesus and the believer in Him? According to Niebuhr,

the idea of the resurrection of the body is a profound expression of an essential element in the Christian world-view, first of all because it expresses and implies the unity of the body and the soul . . . . Soul and body are one.¹

Their unity, however, is a paradoxical unity; human beings are a part of nature, are "in nature", but, "for that reason, not in nature."² We are the children of both necessity and freedom. Our lives are determined by "natural contingencies", yet our characters develop "by rising above nature's necessities and accidents." We are never merely "an element in nature" as our lives are not "wholly determined," but "partly self-determined."³ Thus Niebuhr attempts to do justice to both human necessity and human freedom, but it is always a human freedom which occurs within the limitations of natural contingencies and never without them. The idea of bodily resurrection emphasizes the organic unity of body and soul, nature and spirit, over an emphasis upon a dualistic understanding of their relationship. "There is no sin in nature" alone, therefore

the root of sin is in spirit and not in nature. The assertion of that fact distinguishes Christianity both from naturalism, which denies the reality of sin, and from various types of mysticism and dualism, which think that finiteness as such, or in other words the body, is the basis of evil. Even when sin is not selfishness but sensuality, man's devotion to his physical life and the sense enjoyments differs completely from animal normality. It is precisely because he is free to centre his life in certain physical processes and to lift them out of the

¹Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 291, 292.
²Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 292. (my italics).
³Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 292, 293.
harmonious relationships in which nature has them, that man falls into sin. . . . Since the real self is related organically to the whole of life, it is disturbed in its own unity when it seeks to make itself the centre and disturbs the unity of life. Thus sin lies at the juncture of nature and spirit.

If it is untrue that the body is of itself evil while the soul or the spirit is good, it follows that the highest moral ideal is not one of ascetic flagellation of the flesh but of a physical and spiritual existence in which mind and body serve each other.¹

It is this "highest moral ideal" of the cooperative unity of "mind and body" which is expressed symbolically in the assertion of bodily resurrection, a hope which Niebuhr regards as justified because our human situation, which is involved in the changing flux of history, paradoxically "cannot be completely a part of that flux" because we know ourselves to be involved in it. Yet, the fulfillment of life symbolized in bodily resurrection is not a human act, but a divine one; it is a fulfillment God alone is capable of performing. The idea of a bodily resurrection symbolizes "the divine transformation of [individual] human existence."² But Niebuhr seems unaware of the naiveté of assuming congruence between his modern view of "individuality" and an ancient understanding of "individuality"--if, in fact, there was one.

In Biblical religion the idea of individuality is preserved in the hope of the resurrection. The thoroughly unrational idea of the "resurrection of the body" has the virtue of expressing a dark and unconscious recognition of the sources of individuality in nature as well as in spirit. Without the particularity of the body the spirit of man is easily lost in the universality of divine spirit in the undifferentiated being of eternity.³

²Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 299.
The hope of bodily resurrection asserts not only the eventual transfiguration of individual human existence, but social transformation of the human community as well, as the biblical hope of resurrection of the individual grew out of the hope of a social transformation of Israel.

The idea of resurrection expresses the organic unity of soul and body in the individual, the unity of the individual with society, and the relationship between the eternal and the temporal.

To believe that the body is resurrected is to say, therefore, that eternity is not a cancellation of time and history but that history is fulfilled in eternity. But to insist that the body must be resurrected is to understand that time and history have meaning only as they are borne by an eternity which transcends them. They could in fact not be at all without that eternity. For history would be meaningless succession without the eternal purpose which bears it.\textsuperscript{1}

The permanently valid content of the symbol of the resurrection of Jesus, the second Adam, and subsequently of those who believe in him is the affirmation and transformation of human bodily existence in time. It affirms the goodness of the human experience of the organic unity of soul and body, of the individual and the social, and of the eternal in the temporal. It asserts the transformation of human existence by the overcoming of sin, but not finitude; and the completion and fulfillment of human life "without destroying its essential nature."\textsuperscript{2} The hope of resurrection is harmonious with the "Biblical interpretation of the temporal order as essentially good and not evil."\textsuperscript{3}


\textsuperscript{2}Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 306

The hope of the resurrection . . . embodies the very genius of the Christian idea of the historical. On the one hand it implies that eternity will fulfill and not annul the richness and variety which the temporal process has elaborated. On the other it implies that the condition of finiteness and freedom, which lies at the basis of historical existence, is a problem for which there is no solution by any human power. Only God can solve this problem. From the human perspective it can only be solved by faith . . . The Christian answer is faith in the God who is revealed in Christ and from whose love neither life nor death can separate us.1

In his examination of the idea of resurrection, it is clear that Niebuhr applies his hermeneutics of myth not only to the "Christ myth" as a whole, but to the symbols contained within the story itself. Niebuhr makes no practical distinction between myth and the symbols contained therein; he clearly assumes that their structure is identical and identical methods of interpretation should be used.

Like the symbol of bodily resurrection, the doctrines of the incarnation and the two natures of Christ also similarly characterize the relationship between the eternal and the temporal. Niebuhr interprets the doctrines of incarnation and the two natures of Christ using this same methodology of interpretation. He divides the symbol into "prescientific" and permanently valid elements, rejects the literal understanding of the former and gives an interpretation of what he believes to be the ideal content of the symbol; he rejects the literalization of the form of the myth or symbol and explicates the existential meaning of its content.

As a symbolic truth, the incarnation speaks of the expression of the ideal and eternal in the real and historical--the only way the ideal is ever expressed. The eternal and historical are related in a "qualified dualism."

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They are distinct, yet related insofar as the eternal may be disclosed symbolically in the historical—in the life of the "Jesus of history." Christ is the embodiment of our essential nature, the purity and perfection of human being antecedent to the sinful act. Therefore the love which Christ's life typifies must be sacrificial love, not mutual love.

The New Testament makes the startling claim that in Christ history has achieved both its end and a new beginning. The affirmation that Christ is the end of history signifies that in His life, death, and resurrection the meaning of man's historic existence is fulfilled. The divine sovereignty, which gives it meaning, is revealed to have an ultimate resource of mercy and forgiveness, beyond judgement, which completes history despite the continued fragmentary and contradictory character of all historic reality. The affirmation that in Christ there is a new beginning, that a "new age" has been initiated in the history of mankind, means that the wisdom of faith which apprehends the true meaning of life also contains within it the repentance which is the presupposition of the renewal of life.¹

Christ is the disclosure of the meaning of life and of history, the eternal mystery meaningfully revealed—however partially—in history. Taken literally, Niebuhr says, the incarnation makes metaphysical nonsense: How can that which is infinite be simultaneously finite?

The Christian affirmation that God makes Himself known in history through Christ is partly obscured by the terms used to affirm it. The indication of this tendency is the theory of the two natures of Christ, in terms of which early Christian thought is forced to state its conviction about Jesus' historical and human character on the one hand, and his significance as the revelation of the divine on the other. By stating this double facet of Christ in ontic terms, a truth of faith, which can be expressed only symbolically, is transmuted into a truth of speculative reason. Christ is, according to these statements of faith, both God and man. It is asserted that his humanity does not derogate from his divinity or his divinity from his humanity. All definitions of

Christ which affirm both his divinity and humanity in the sense that they ascribe both finite and historically conditioned and eternal and unconditioned qualities to his nature must verge on logical nonsense. It is possible for a character, event or fact of history to point symbolically beyond history and to become a source of disclosure of an eternal meaning, purpose and power which bears history. But it is not possible for any person to be historical and unconditioned at the same time. But the logical nonsense is not as serious a defect as the fact that the statement tends to reduce Christian faith to metaphysical truths which need not be apprehended inwardly by faith.¹

The "Jesus of history" is a historical person who, interpreted as the "Christ of faith", symbolically points beyond history and becomes a revelation of the "eternal meaning, purpose and power which bears history." True to his dictum (myths must be taken "seriously but not literally"²), Niebuhr rejects the literal interpretation of the incarnation as God actually taking on human flesh, but embraces what he understands the symbol to be saying metaphorically. For him, the incarnation means God's acceptance of the intrinsic goodness of finitude. If God can be said symbolically to become human, human nature, finitude, and temporality are all therefore in some sense hallowed. The eternal has entered the flux of history, revealed Himself in it, and declared it good.

The doctrine of the incarnation makes an assertion not only about the character of history, but about the relation of history to eternity and humanity to God.

All historical judgments are based upon an explicit or implicit assumption about the character of history itself . . . there can be no judgement about the character of history which does not rest upon a further assumption about the relation of history to eternity . . . . Man

is a creature who cannot find a true norm short of the nature of ultimate reality. There is the significance of the historic doctrine of Christ as the "second Adam." The same Christ who is accepted by faith as the revelation of the character of God is also regarded as the revelation of the true character of man... historic "laws" are inadequate as final norms of human freedom. The only adequate norm is the historic incarnation of a perfect love which actually transcends history, and can appear in it only to be crucified... The issue of Biblical religion is not primarily the problem of how finite man can know God but how sinful man is to be reconciled to God and how history is to overcome the tragic consequences of its "false eternals," its proud and premature efforts to escape finiteness.

It is in answer to this central problem of history, as Biblical faith conceives it, that God speaks to man in the Incarnation; and the content of the revelation is an act of reconciliation in which the judgment of God upon the pride of man in not abrogated, in which the sin of man becomes the more sharply revealed and defined by the knowledge that God is Himself the victim of man's sin and pride. Nevertheless the final word is not one of judgment but of mercy and forgiveness.

This doctrine of Atonement and justification is the "stone which the builders rejected" and which must be made "the head of the corner." It is an absolutely essential presupposition for the understanding of human nature and human history.1

In Christian tradition, Christ is symbolized as the "second Adam", to Niebuhr this means that the Christ of Faith is the symbol of essential humanity--humanity's true nature before the fall. He symbolizes the purity of being before the sinful act. He is the embodiment of the ethical ideal of the impossible possibility in history--the transcendent symbolized in the immanent, God as a human person under the conditions of finiteness. Niebuhr refuses to understand this literally and consequently does not subject these assertions to metaphysical speculation; he sees these assertions

as expressing symbolic or mythical truths which after being apprehended by faith become our presuppositions for interpreting experience.

The truth as apprehended by faith is not something which simple men believe upon authority and wiser men deduce from experience. For there is an element in the truth of faith which defies the wisdom of both wise and foolish, more particularly of the wise. But on the other hand a truth of faith is not something which stands perpetually in contradiction to experience. On the contrary it illumines experience and is in turn validated by experience.¹

As stated earlier, Niebuhr sees faith and experience as having a circular or reciprocal relation such that experience also critiques faith and it is the critique of contemporary scientific experience that has led Niebuhr to reject the literal interpretation of the Christ myth. This understanding of the reciprocal relationship between faith and experience or faith and reason has allowed Niebuhr to integrate the insights of liberalism and orthodoxy.

In this same strain of thought, Niebuhr is led to acknowledge the partial truths of theologies which begin with nature and find grace and also those which begin with grace and in turn illumine nature. As a more adequate solution, Niebuhr suggests his reciprocal understanding of the relationship between nature and grace.² It is this understanding which is typified in Niebuhr’s refusal to accept the idea that the image of God is totally effaced and that human nature is totally depraved. In keeping with the reciprocality, he asserts the corruption (but not the total destruction) of the image of God in a humanity which is corrupted, but not totally depraved.

It is the atonement of Christ which is the solution to the problem of humanity which is not finitude, but sin. The atonement is the meaning of

²Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 63-64.
the incarnation which is that the justice and mercy of God are one and yet
remain distinct.

In the New Testament the Atonement is the significant content of the
Incarnation. To say that Christ is the "express image of His person" is
to assert that in the epic of this life and death the final mystery of the
divine power which bears history is clarified; and, with that
clarification, life and history are given their true meaning.¹

Niebuhr regards "the classical Christian idea of the Atonement" as
emphasizing that "God is both the propitiator and the propitiated." That "the
justice and the forgiveness of God are one, just as Father and Son are equally
God" is "the central truth embodied in the doctrine of the Atonement."

For the highest justice of God is the holiness of His love. It is love as
law which man affronts and defies. Yet forgiveness and justice are not
one, just as Father and Son are two. The fact that God cannot
overcome evil without displaying in history His purpose to take the
effects of evil upon and into himself, means that the divine mercy
cannot be effective until the seriousness of sin is fully known. The
knowledge that sin causes suffering to God is an indication of the
seriousness of sin. It is by that knowledge that man is brought to
despair. Without this despair there is no possibility of the contrition
which appropriates the divine forgiveness. It is in this contrition and
in this appropriation of divine mercy and forgiveness that the human
situation is fully understood and overcome. In this experience man
understands himself in his finiteness, realizes the guilt of his efforts to
escape his insufficiency and dependence and lays hold upon a power
beyond himself which both completes his incompleteness and purges
him of his false and vain efforts at self-completion.²

Niebuhr's christology is not as either Lehmann or Wolf have pictured it.
Lehmann takes Niebuhr "seriously", but unfortunately too "literally" and
eisegetes Niebuhr's christology to suit his more orthodox "evangelical" taste

¹Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 55.
²Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 56-57.
while Wolf regards christology as ancillary to Niebuhr's anthropological thought.

Niebuhr's christology is an interpretation of what he has called "the Christ myth" and, despite the fact that he uses the same terms, he does not mean them in quite the same literal fashion that would allow him to make metaphysical speculation about the incarnation. Niebuhr asks and attempts to give a relevant answer to the question of the symbolic meaning of a symbol such as the incarnation. He does not accept the assertion of incarnation as literal and then attempt to explain what it is; he understands the assertion as symbolic and attempts to explain what it means.

The assertion of incarnation means that the transcendent is manifested in the immanent—at least partially. The transcendent ethical ideal of the impossible possibility is embodied in the life of Christ and especially in His death by crucifixion—the ideal of suffering sacrificial love. The resurrection and the parousia assert the relationship between history and its ultimate meaning. Since resurrection is bodily, history and time are affirmed as meaningful and yet not ultimately meaningful. The parousia symbolizes the hope for history's perfection within history—an end to be strived for but which will never be literally achieved: the kingdom of God "is in fact always coming but never here."

In history, it is revelation which gives us the transcendent key to interpreting history for it gives us a viewpoint which reason, fixed within history itself, cannot give us. Therefore, a Christian approach to history must affirm God's intervention in history—not in miraculous fashion—but in the

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form of events which depict the transcendent meaning of history and so "reconstruct the rational concepts of meaning which men and cultures construct under the false assumption that they have a mind which completely transcends the flux of history." ¹

God is encountered in history first "in creativities which introduce elements into the historic situation which could not have been anticipated" --when by an act of grace God makes an election for which no reason can be given--as when Israel became the chosen people, in the calling of Moses and many of the prophets, and certainly in a suffering messiah. Second, God is known in judgement when through the word of God, "human ideals, values, and historical achievements" are found to contradict the divine will and thus the ultimate coherence of the universe. The substance of these judgements can never be anticipated by human wisdom, but can, once given, "be incorporated into a new interpretation of the meaning of history." Third, "God is encountered in events in which the divine judgments lead to a reconstitution of life." ² The salient example of this third way is the atonement of Christ.

It is the atonement which Niebuhr regards as the most important christological symbol as he regards it as the essential meaning of the incarnation. In the symbol of the atonement Christ as the second Adam--the symbol of essential humanity--is represented as both the propitiated and


the propitiator. Thus God's justice and His mercy are seen as being one, and yet paradoxically remain distinct. In faith and contrition humanity may be united to God through this second Adam whose sacrificial love propitiates the justice of God and provides for humanity the ideal of the perfect life to be strived for. In striving for this ideal we are found inadequate and incomplete; we are judged but nonetheless granted God's mercy through Christ's communion with Him. The problem of sin is thus overcome "in principle" while yet remaining a reality "in fact".
CHAPTER FOUR: NIEBUHR'S ANTHROPOLOGY

Niebuhr's anthropology presupposes the divine disclosure of the nature of human existence in three ways:

(1) It emphasizes the height of self-transcendence in man's spiritual stature in its doctrine of "image of God." (2) It insists on man's weakness, dependence, and finiteness, on his involvement in the necessities and contingencies of the natural world, without however, regarding this finiteness as, of itself, a source of evil in man. In its purest form the Christian view of man regards man as a unity of God-likeness and creatureliness in which he remains a creature even in the highest spiritual dimensions of his existence and may reveal elements of the image of God even in the lowliest aspects of his natural life. (3) It affirms that the evil in man is a consequence of his inevitable though not necessary unwillingness to acknowledge his dependence, to accept his finiteness and to admit his insecurity, and unwillingness which involves him in the vicious circle of accentuating the insecurity from which he seeks escape.¹

These three aspects of human existence reflect the biblical affirmations that (1) humankind alone was made in God's image, that (2) despite our uniqueness we are limited by the finitude intrinsic to our status as creature (not Creator), and that (3) sin is rooted not in our status as creature but in the uniquely human position of being created in the image of God which gives humans a greater potential for both good and evil. In Niebuhr's words, "Christianity measures the stature of man more highly and his virtue more severely than any alternative view."²

Niebuhr is not attempting a wholesale abandonment of rationality--far from it--but he does attempt to humble our confidence in its ability to answer ultimate questions about human existence. He asserts that biblical

²Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 161.
Christian anthropology contains seeming contradictions which may not appropriately be assumed within an entirely rational system:

the Christian doctrine of selfhood means that neither the life of the individual self nor the total drama of man's existence upon earth can be conceived in strictly rational terms of coherence... history remains morally ambiguous to the end.¹

Niebuhr's answer to this dilemma is the assertion that an accurate description of human existence must involve the paradox of an understanding of God

which stands beyond the limits of rationality... the situation is that the ultrarational pinnacles of Christian truth, embodying paradox and contradiction and straining at the limits of rationality, are made plausible when understood as the keys which make the drama of human life and history comprehensible, and without which it is either given a too-simple meaning or falls into meaninglessness.²

Niebuhr constructs his anthropology by the interaction of his two sources--faith and reason--which become two approaches to analyzing the phenomenon of human existence. He may attempt to analyze human nature from a more cultural, sociological, or political viewpoint--which he does in Moral Man and Immoral Society--or he may attempt an analysis based more upon the Christian tradition itself as in An Interpretation of Christian Ethics or Beyond Tragedy. Despite the often more explicit nature of either of these approaches, neither exists without the other operating at least


surreptitiously in the background—they are two moments in one process. In *The Nature and Destiny of Man* they work in a more obvious partnership to provide an explication of the nature of human existence which is faithful to Niebuhr's understanding of the biblical dialectical view, and yet does not contradict what we have come to accept as truth on the basis of contemporary scientific methods.

His presuppositions based upon faith are subjected to rational scrutiny—but rational coherence is not made the final test of truth. Critical reason does have the power to alter or correct the substance of Niebuhr's faith—as it did throughout his life—but does not, upon the basis of logical consistency alone, have the power to undermine those presuppositions themselves. Niebuhr consistently asserts in different forms that rationale has an ultrarational basis which reason itself is incapable of establishing. Human history is interpreted rationally, but upon the basis of mythological presuppositions. Niebuhr claims that "the conclusions arrived at are partly [but not entirely] determined by the principle of interpretation with which the inquiry is begun."¹ Therefore, Niebuhr's two approaches for interpreting human existence form a hermeneutical circle.

Niebuhr's analysis of human existence approached from the side of reason—of culture, sociology, politics—is done appealing to the basis of the scientific method, but, in his hands, nonetheless includes the implicit ultrarational presuppositions of his faith. His analysis upon the basis of faith is done through his interpretation of the historic biblical revelation, an

interpretation which accepts the validity of--but not the transcedent value of--the scientific method.

Niebuhr adopts what he calls "biblical realism" as a third option between the extremes of Kierkegaard and Barth. Unlike Kierkegaard, he attempts to take "the coherences and causalities of life and history more seriously" and in contrast to Barth, Niebuhr rejects what he sees as Barth's "biblical literalism" and negative "attitude" toward both modern science and philosophy.\(^1\)

In adopting this position, Niebuhr first makes clear his rejection of a literalistic picture of the divine interruption of the laws of nature: "the realm of natural causation is more closed, and less subject to divine intervention, that the biblical world view assumes."\(^2\) Nevertheless, he maintains that, in keeping with the biblical world view, we can interpret human history as a continuing dialogue with God; we can see history as "open to indeterminate possibilities of good and of evil"; and we can recognize in history particular revelatory events which "have a special depth and penetrate to the meaning of the whole."\(^3\)

But meanwhile, this history has a base in nature as man himself has. And the course of nature is more subject to inflexible law than the Bible supposes. In other words, we have given up one kind of miracle, and miracle is the dearest child of faith. We do not have difficulty with all miracles. The healing miracles of Jesus, for instance, are credible because we recognize the depth and height of spirit in the dimension of each personality, and the consequent spiritual dimension

\(^2\)Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 197; 232.
\(^3\)Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 197; 232.
of bodily ill. Psychosomatic medicine corroborates such a conception. But we do not believe in the virgin birth, and we have difficulty with the physical resurrection of Christ. We do not believe, in other words, that revelatory events validate themselves by a divine break-through in the natural order. There is a great spiritual gain in this position which is in accord with Christ's own rejection of signs and wonders as validations of his messianic mission: "This wicked generation seeketh a sign" (Matt. 12:39). It leads to an apprehension of the points of revelation by repentance and faith; that is to say, it insists that the truth of revelation must be apprehended by the whole person and cannot merely be accepted as a historical fact, validated by the miraculous character of the fact. The deeper truth must be apprehended by becoming the key which unlocks the mystery of what man is and should be, and of what God is in relations with men.¹

By adopting "biblical realism," he gains a position which is capable of integrating the symbolic truth of biblical assertions apprehended by faith with a modern world view acquainted with the scientific method. Niebuhr rejects only those features of the biblical world view which contradict what science is capable of telling us about the natural world. The other features--history as a continuing encounter with God, history's openness to indeterminate possibilities of good and evil, and the possibility of revelatory events which disclose the depth of history while conforming to the natural order--Niebuhr readily affirms.

But according to Niebuhr, we must make a distinction between natural history and human history. Human freedom requires this distinction because the moment we accept even the possibility of human freedom we reject the possibility of reducing human history to the rational coherence of natural history--to do so would necessarily distort the truth.

Niebuhr's understanding of the nature of human existence is that we paradoxically unite in our very being both the goodness of our creaturehood and the evil of our misuse of the unique powers our special status has given us. His statement that "the whole character of human history is ... implicitly defined in the Christian symbolism of the 'first' and 'second' Adam" confirms an anthropological observation in more christological terms--and it also suggests the mutual dependence of christology and anthropology. Created in the image of God, we possess a self-transcendent freedom unknown to the rest of the natural realm. Its possession, however, has enabled us to sin. This paradox forms the dialectical basis of Niebuhr's anthropology, whose first member, human beings as "image of God and creature," is the more christological.

Christian anthropology has interpreted the biblical doctrine of creation in the "image of God" to include both human "rational faculties" and to "suggest something beyond them." In Niebuhr's view, the doctrine of the "image of God" means that human beings have a capacity for self-transcendence which includes but goes beyond human rational abilities--something both more and less than mere freedom of choice. Not only do we possess the immediate freedom to choose between the alternatives presented us by nature, but we are self-determining also in the sense in which we must choose our "total end." In this confrontation with "endless potentialities", we can set no limits on what we "ought to be, short of the character of ultimate reality." Despite this lack of limitation upon what we ought to be, we are limited by what we

are. Nature limits us in that we are unable "to choose anything beyond the bounds set by the creation" in which we stand. The "ought" corresponds to our being made in the "image of God"; the limitations of the "is" reflects the natural limitations of our creaturehood.

In Christian faith the place of Christ as both the revelation of the character of God and of the essential nature of man (the "second Adam") does justice to the fact that man can find his true norm only in the character of God but is nevertheless a creature who cannot and must not aspire to be God. The God who is his norm is God as He is revealed in a character of human history, that is, in Christ. Christ is at once an historical character and more than an historical character. His life transcends the possibilities of history but it remains relevant to all historical striving, for all historical goals can be expressed only in supra-historical terms. If stated in purely historical terms they will embody some contingency of nature and history and set a false limit for the human spirit.

In order to understand our world as meaningful, we must find that source of meaning in God who "transcends the world" beyond our own "capacity to transcend it." It is "self-transcendence which leads inevitably to a search for a God who transcends the world." This key to interpreting the world is disclosed in Christ who reveals our essential nature—the paradox of freedom in a self-transcendence limited in its realization by our own status as creatures. It is Christ who reveals to us the nature of what human beings ought to be by his personification of the impossible possibility of impartial sacrificial love. But this "ought" must be understood in the light of what human beings are as creatures—what it means to be made in the "image of God" must be balanced with the finitude inherent in our creaturehood.

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1Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 163.  
2Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 163-164.  
3Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 164, 165.
The Bible consistently witnesses to the goodness in finitude and never locates human evil in finitude alone. But our finitude does impose limitations which merely the *attempt* to ignore will bring about distortions. Because of the nature of our human limitations, we cannot simply imitate the example of Christ. He is the "trans-historical norm of historical life"--a norm which Niebuhr argues cannot be fully realized in history (not even in the historical Jesus) and, in some cases, should not be even attempted.¹ Niebuhr's ethic is one of human responsibility, not one of perfectionism.

Niebuhr's understanding of the biblical doctrines of creation and the unique human status of creation in the image of God "overlap" with his christology. Because human beings have this capacity for self-transcendence, the God who is revealed in history must be transcendent or He would be an idol. But because of our creaturehood, we are limited in history from fully imitating the transcendent ideal He reveals in history. Our capacity for indeterminate self-transcendence makes Christ a possibility in history, but our creaturehood makes the full realization of all He represents impossible for us. Christ understood as the "impossible possibility" reflects Niebuhr's understanding of the anthropological paradox we experience as creatures who nonetheless possess the special status of being uniquely created in the image of God.

The life of Christ is our ideal, the one life in which the law of love is fulfilled--the "impossible possibility." In Christ our sin is overcome "in principle but not in fact." Only in Christ can we see a human life lived as it should be. "Adam's perfection before the Fall is not fully understood until

¹Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 164.
the 'second Adam' defines it.¹ In the power and grace of God we strive toward this ideal, knowing we will not achieve it, but that we can approximate it to a greater or lesser degree.

The Christian gospel . . . enters the world with the proclamation that in Christ both 'wisdom' and 'power' are available to man; which is to say that not only has the true meaning of life been disclosed but also that resources have been made available to fulfill that meaning . . . . The Christian doctrine of grace stands in juxtaposition to the Christian doctrine of original sin and has meaning only if the latter is an accurate description of the actual facts of human experience.²

Christ as the "impossible possibility" in history reflects the human paradox of creaturehood and creation in the image of God while the doctrine of original sin reflects the christological doctrine of the atonement. It would be incorrect to say that either side of this dialectic caused the other, but assuming the appropriateness of either member makes its companion necessary. The Christian doctrine of the atonement makes the doctrine of original sin necessary, and vice versa.

The possibility of original sin is rooted not in our finitude or creaturehood which we share with the rest of creation, but in our unique status as being made in the image of God. According to Niebuhr's analysis and exposition of the Genesis story, the first Adam is symbolic of every human being--the "prescientific" myths of creation and fall speak in a "horizontal" fashion about what is true "vertically" for every human. In Dennis McCann's words:

¹Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 290.
"original sin [for Niebuhr] symbolizes the actual situation of human nature throughout history."¹

Despite their being clothed in the "prescientific" language of an ancient era, they speak a "permanently valid" truth which is equally relevant to modern humans. Adam and Eve were not historical characters, but the personifications of what human beings sense to be existentially true about themselves. Niebuhr thus separates the content of the myth from the often literalized form—he asserts that the myth has a meaning divorced from a deadening concretization which would have modern Christians adopt as a tenet of their faith a "prescientific" explanation of human origin.

Niebuhr regards the idea of the Fall as essential to the Christian proclamation and understanding of human nature, but its validity does not depend upon the Fall as an actual event in history. The Fall is not a historical event, but "a symbol of an aspect of every historical moment in the life of man."² This aspect is sin, "the corruption of man's true essence, but not its destruction."

Niebuhr differs with certain strains of both Protestant and Roman Catholic tradition in his position that the image of God is not lost or totally effaced; human beings are corrupted by sin, but not totally corrupted. Against Luther, he claims that what the doctrine asserts is there in corrupted form; against Aquinas, he argues that there are no super-added gifts which were lost in the Fall and the sacraments restore.

Niebuhr's hermeneutics of myth makes it possible for him to adopt such a position. Luther and Aquinas were attempting to make sense of the myth by accepting it as a literal recounting of history; given their premises, each of their approaches has value. But from Niebuhr's point of view, the assertion that human beings were created in the image of God is not a recounting of a literal origin, but an assertion of what is "permanently valid" about human nature. Therefore, the doctrine of the image of God reflects a quality of human being which is not totally effaced or lost in a historical "fall". Niebuhr suggests that human dishonesty or the need for self-deception itself is a "refutation of the doctrine of man's total depravity."¹ With this in mind, the unqualified assertion of Niebuhr's anthropological pessimism is placed into some doubt.

Niebuhr's treatment of sin yields a corollary to the anthropological paradox expressed in the tension between our creaturehood and our creation in the image of God. Niebuhr's understanding of the image of God affirms human self-transcendence and freedom; his understanding of our status as creatures affirms the limitations intrinsic to finitude--we are beings possessed of indeterminate freedom, living at "the juncture of nature and spirit . . . involved in both freedom and necessity."² We are both free and limited in our freedom; but in the biblical view, the problem of finitude is subordinate to the greater problem of sin. The contradictory nature of our situation does not cause, but is the occasion for our sin.³

¹Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 203.
²Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 181.
³Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 178.
Human evil is a consequence of our "inevitable though not necessary unwillingness" to live within our creaturely dependence, finiteness and insecurity—"to have faith in the ultimate security of God's love."\(^1\) It is not our state of finitude and dependence which tempt us, but our anxiety about our human condition—an awareness possible only because of our capacity for self-transcendence. Sin is thus the wrong use of our capacity for self-transcendence in the attempt to rid ourselves of the anxiety intrinsic to the human condition. Sin is not that human condition, but the unwillingness to accept the reality of our weakness, dependency, and finitude and place our trust in God. In our attempt to rid ourselves of the anxiety intrinsic to our creaturely status we attempt to prematurely resolve it in an idol rather than the true God.

The basic source of temptation is, therefore, not the inertia of "matter" or "nature" against the larger and more inclusive ends which reason envisages. It resides in the inclination of man, either to deny the contingent character of his existence (in pride and self-love) or to escape from his freedom (in sensuality) . . . . The truth is that man is tempted by the basic insecurity of human existence to make himself doubly secure and by the insignificance of his place in the total scheme of life to prove his significance. The will-to-power is in short both a direct form and an indirect instrument of the pride which Christianity regards as sin in its quintessential form.\(^2\)

Our human situation of "finiteness and freedom" becomes temptation only when we falsely interpret it.\(^3\) In the story of the fall, it is the serpent who offers this false interpretation, suggesting by this role that evil precedes

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\(^1\) Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 150, 183.

\(^2\) Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 185, 192

\(^3\) Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 180.
human evil. In keeping with this idea, Niebuhr quotes Kierkegaard in suggesting that "sin posits itself."\(^1\)

For Niebuhr, unbelief is the basis of sin, but in his analysis of sin he relies more heavily upon the idea of pride being foundational for understanding the nature of sin. In our contradictory situation of being "finite spirit", it is inevitable that given the capacity of envisioning the whole, we will imagine our finite selves to constitute this infinite whole. Since we are finite this will occur; but because we are spirit, it does not necessarily have to occur.

Man, being both free and bound, both limited and limitless, is anxious. Anxiety is the inevitable concomitant of the paradox of freedom and finiteness in which man is involved. Anxiety is the internal precondition of sin. It is the inevitable spiritual state of man, standing in the paradoxical situation of freedom and finiteness. Anxiety is the internal description of the state of temptation. It must not be identified with sin because there is always the ideal possibility that faith would purge anxiety of the tendency toward sinful self-assertion. The ideal possibility is that faith in the ultimate security of God's love would overcome all immediate insecurities of nature and history. That is why Christian orthodoxy has consistently defined unbelief as the root of sin, or as the sin which precedes pride.\(^2\)

"When anxiety has conceived it brings forth both pride and sensuality."

When we fall into pride, we are seeking to raise our "contingent existence to unconditioned significance;" when we fall into sensuality, we seek to "escape from our unlimited possibilities of freedom . . . by losing ourselves in some 'mutable good' . . . some natural vitality."\(^3\) As unbelief is more basic than pride, pride is more basic than sensuality and has three observable

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\(^1\)Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 181.
\(^2\)Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 182-183.
\(^3\)Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 186.
expressions which are not truly distinct in life: pride of power, pride of knowledge, and pride of virtue.

Pride of power is the pretension of "self-sufficiency and self-mastery" in the face of the obvious facts of our insufficiency. Our insufficiency, however, is less obvious to those who wield relatively greater amounts of power. Such a position of power tempts the possessor of it to place faith in him or herself rather than in God who is truly ultimate. Those who wield less power are tempted by power's illusive promise of invulnerability—in their quest for power they replace God with the struggle to make themselves secure.

Pride of knowledge reflects in more subtle form the expressions of pride of power.

All human knowledge is tainted with an "ideological" taint. It pretends to be more true than it is. It is finite knowledge, gained from a particular perspective; but it pretends to be final and ultimate knowledge. Exactly analogous to the cruder pride of power, the pride of intellect is derived on the one hand from ignorance of the finiteness of the human mind and on the other hand from an attempt to obscure the known conditioned character of human knowledge and the taint of self-interest in human truth.... Each great thinker makes the same mistake, in turn, of imagining himself the final thinker.  

Pride of virtue is the moral pride with which we condemn others by our self-righteous judgements because they have not conformed to our "highly arbitrary standards." In moral pride, cruelty and self-righteousness are joined when we imagine our conditioned standards to be absolute and delude ourselves into seeing all non-conformists as unqualifiedly evil regardless of the nature of our or their point of view.

2Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 199.
It is unbelief which lies behind pride. "Unbelief or mistrust is the basic and primal sin" which is "original" to the human condition.\(^1\) Pride is the expression of unbelief and only in Christ the "second Adam" is the nature of sin fully revealed.

The Christian faith is not only an answer to the human situation of self-contradiction; it is a fuller and clearer revelation of that contradiction. The revelation of God as redeemer accentuates a previous knowledge of God as judge, for the simple reason that the revelation of His redemptive love clarifies His character of holiness, in terms of which human sin is judged. The anthropological consequences of this paradox are that faith in God's ultimate resolution of the contradiction in which man stands clarifies man's knowledge of that contradiction. He sees that his anxiety is due to his unbelief.\(^2\)

The human self-contradiction revealed in the stories of creation and fall is illuminated in Christ. By his depiction of the nature of essential humanity, the depth of our self-contradiction—the contrast between the ideal and the real—is made evident by the contrast between His character and ours. In Christ the cycle is complete and through the atonement the contradiction overcome "in principle"—the anthropological paradox is resolved in the atonement in which God's justice and mercy are understood as one. The contradiction is resolved perspectively, not in history—not "in fact."

Niebuhr's anthropology and christology are thus complementary, each implying the other. In his uncompromisingly realistic interpretation of sin he posits the symbols of Christ's incarnation and atonement. His every anthropological assertion has its christological corollary and vice versa; for the full explication of one, the other is necessary.

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\(^1\)Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 289
\(^2\)Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 290.
It does Reinhold Niebuhr injustice to regard him as a man who ultimately failed to move beyond a merely pessimistic understanding of human beings centered exclusively upon anthropological concerns. He is intensely pessimistic about intrinsic human abilities to achieve perfection, but Niebuhr does not leave us there. In Christ both the power and grace of God are found—both justification and, in his words, "real sanctification."

To understand the more pessimistic side of his anthropology in isolation from his more positive christological thought is necessarily to misunderstand a man whose primary goal was to make clear for a generation the relevance and meaning of the Christian gospel. In the end these two central strains of his thought must be understood together. Niebuhr did not underestimate the capacities of human beings for evil, but attempted also—if not as explicitly—to outline our capacities for good and to direct them for the good of all humankind. His integration of the insights of both liberalism and orthodoxy through his mythical method are valuable and most probably will be so for some time to come—at least for certain varieties of liberalism. His thought was certainly not without flaw, but most of his critics would be hard pressed to equal his achievements.

Niebuhr attempted through his mythological analysis of the Christian gospel to do uncompromising justice both to the realities of the world and sin—and to grace and the indeterminate possibilities of human beings.

To understand that the Christ in us is not a possession but a hope, that perfection is not a reality but an intention; that such peace as we know in this life is never purely the peace of achievement but the serenity of being 'completely known and all forgiven'; all this does not destroy moral ardour or responsibility. On the contrary it is the only way of preventing premature completions of life, or arresting the new and more terrible pride which may find its roots in the soil of
humility, and of saving the Christian life from the intolerable pretension of saints who have forgotten that they are sinners.¹

"Is Christianity better understood, preached, lived, as a response to human sinfulness or divine grace?" Niebuhr answers that it must be a response to both. And in answering so, he attempts to avoid the pitfalls of the naive hopes of most of the social gospel movement and the despair of modern irreligion. In such a response, Niebuhr's approach seems richer than either alternative and is thus of more than merely historical interest. Any modern theological anthropology must do justice to the depths of human evil illustrated by modern history, but yet affirm that the possibilities of human good are not thereby exhausted. Niebuhr represents an imperfect yet important step towards an adequate Christian affirmation of both of these truths.

CHAPTER FIVE: NIEBUHR AND TRAGEDY

Essentially, the experience of grace in religion is the apprehension of the absolute from the perspective of the relative. The unachieved is in some sense felt to be achieved or realized. The sinner is "justified" even though his sin is not overcome. The world, as revealed in its processes of nature, is known to be imperfect, and yet it is recognized as a creation of God. Man is regarded as both a sinner and a child of God. In these paradoxes true religion makes present reality bearable even while it insists that God is denied, frustrated and defied in the immediate situation.  

The preceding paragraph from Reinhold Niebuhr's 1934 book, Reflections on the End of an Era, illustrates several features of his thought which were characteristic of Niebuhr from the publication of his first book in 1927, Does Civilization Need Religion? to his death in 1971. The quotation shows, in brief, why Niebuhr's thought was powerful, but yet is seriously flawed, particularly from our contemporary perspective; Niebuhr remains an important thinker, but his thought cannot solve our contemporary theological problems.

"The experience of grace in religion is the apprehension of the absolute from the perspective of the relative," Niebuhr says. Underlying such a statement as this is the dialectical method characteristic of his hermeneutics of myth--what he refers to as his "mythical method of interpretation" which he first discussed using those terms in 1935 in An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, but nonetheless underlies all of his earlier (and later) work.

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Niebuhr divides reality into the ideal and the real, the absolute and the relative, God (or the gospel) and the world, religion and science. He never opts for one without the other, but consistently attempts to hold both together in tension, assuming that this unresolved dialectic is a better explanation to live by than either of the two options alone. Niebuhr reads this "qualified dualism"¹--as he first called it--into the religious stories of Judaism and Christianity: the creation, the fall, the incarnation, the resurrection.

Niebuhr finds in these stories, which he refers to exclusively as "myths," a perception of God as both transcendent and immanent—not so transcendent, however, as to become dualism, and not so immanent as to be pantheistic. "Prophetic religions," says Niebuhr, are characterized by this "qualified dualism." This "qualified dualism," according to Niebuhr, grants these religions an ethical power beyond that of pantheism or dualism. If we interpret the world from a pantheistic perspective, we are likely to affirm that the merely possible, what is, is the good. If we interpret the world in dualistic fashion, God and the good are beyond our reach--impossible.

Niebuhr's ethic, reflecting his hermeneutical presuppositions, is that of an "impossible possibility." To fully realize the perfection of the ideal is not possible, but the possible participates in, is directed towards, and partly realizes the ideal. Niebuhr's ethical thinking is directed towards solving the problem of relative ethical distinctions and choices. The absolute provides a standard whereby a variety of ethical choices may be evaluated as to both

their closeness to the absolute good and their possibility of realization. In making practical ethical choices, Niebuhr attempts to recommend the possible alternative which he believes most conforms to its impossible ideal. Niebuhr's concluding paragraphs of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* provide an excellent example of this. He states there that justice's possibility of complete fulfillment is "illusory", but an illusion necessary in order to stir human actions that justice might be partly realized because "justice cannot be approximated if the hope of its perfect realization does not generate a sublime madness in the soul."\(^1\)

The Christian tradition of Christ's perfection provides the absolute by which we measure the relative. Thus, the relationship between Niebuhr's theology and his ethics mirrors the structure of his hermeneutical presuppositions. Theology provides the absolutes; ethics decides which relative alternative best conforms to those absolutes.

The "experience of grace" is an "apprehension," a perception, "of the absolute from the perspective of the relative." In the world of the relatively possible, we perceive our religious tradition's interpretation of the meaning of absolute perfection--the incarnation of Christ. We see our failure to fulfill this perfection, yet in the symbol of the atonement "the unachieved is in some sense felt to be achieved or realized"--we perceive ourselves as forgiven and direct ourselves toward realizing, as far as possible, the impossible ideal of Christ's perfection.

Niebuhr affirms that each of us is "both a sinner and a child of God." Characteristically, Niebuhr presents two options which he regards as

oversimplifications, if considered alone, and proceeds to attempt to hold the
two together in tension and affirm that both are needed to explain the
complexity of human life. The "paradox," as Niebuhr calls it, is a theme
which continues though the whole of his career, and is a source of contention
about the pervasive tone of Niebuhr's thinking: Should Niebuhr's work be
systematically interpreted upon the basis of his understanding of the sinful
quality of human beings? Or should we focus upon the identity of human
beings as children of God—as recipients of God's grace? Which of his two
features of the nature of human being takes precedence over the other?

In offering his solution to this problem, Robert McAfee Brown declares
that Niebuhr is a "pessimistic optimist."1 The term is memorable and reflects
something of both Niebuhr's thought and humor (and Brown's as well). Few
know Niebuhr so well as he, and his Essential Reinhold Niebuhr represents
an excellent introductory volume of Niebuhr's writings. But despite the
term's appropriate reflection of the dialectical nature of Niebuhr's thought,
there is something that "pessimistic optimist" suggests which inaccurately
interprets Niebuhr's position: it's emphasis is off the mark.

I do not suggest that Niebuhr was an unqualified pessimist who did
nothing but aim his finger (and his typewriter) at the world and shriek
about its sinfulness and tragedy, because Niebuhr critiqued in order to
construct. He spent his life in the effort to move those within the scope of
his influence toward realizing his vision of Christian ethical ideals. And in
this sense at least, we must say that his thought is life-affirming: he stood
for action—not just a condemnation of the status quo. Those who credit him

1Robert McAfee Brown, ed., introduction to The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr:
merely with reviving the Christian doctrine of sin do him a discredit, for he
critiqued the impracticability of perfectionism in order to accomplish the
possibility of more ethical human behavior based upon relative moral
judgments informed by (but not literal expressions of) traditional absolutes.

But can Niebuhr be rightly understood as any kind of optimist? -- even a
pessimistic one? Did Niebuhr regard human nature, and the destiny that
nature impels us toward, as being truly optimistic?

In true tragedy the hero defies malignant power to assert the integrity
of his soul. He suffers because he is strong and not because he is
weak. He involves himself in guilt not by his vice but by his virtue.
... Surely Nietzsche was right in his assertion, that tragedy stands
beyond pessimism and optimism.¹

Niebuhr repeatedly stated that human history was tragic, and criticized
those whom he regarded as not understanding "the full tragedy of human
history"²; but held that human beings (if not history itself) could move
beyond a merely tragic view of life through the vehicle of a religious
interpretation of existence enabling us to see that "there is beauty in our
tragedy."³ The tragedy of human existence was so obvious to Niebuhr as to
cause him to reject optimism out of hand--the six o'clock news wouldn't
allow him to entertain optimism as an option--but his interpretation of life is
not tragic in the sense that tragedy may be equated with unqualified
pessimism: neither simply an optimist nor pessimist he.

¹Reinhold Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of
²Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. 1 (New York:
Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941) 148.
³Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society (New York: Charles Scribner's
Sons, 1960) 277.
Christianity's view of history is tragic insofar as it recognizes evil as an inevitable concomitant of even the highest spiritual enterprises. It is beyond tragedy insofar as it does not regard evil as inherent in existence itself but as finally under the dominion of a good God.¹

What does it mean, therefore, to adopt an interpretation of life which is "beyond tragedy"?

It means first to allow our human reason to inform us empirically of the tragic nature of human life: we are born, we all suffer to some degree, we all die. We must do justice to what we know empirically and rationally about life. We know that goodness is often thwarted, that evil sometimes triumphs over good, that both exist within ourselves, and that the ultimate victory of one over the other--both in ourselves and in history as a whole--is uncertain; history remains ambiguous to the end. Niebuhr never questions the ability of modern science to give us reliable knowledge about the world and ourselves. Nevertheless, what science cannot do is interpret this information in a manner that proclaims life to be worth living.

Secondly, Niebuhr would have us re-interpret this unmitigated pessimism through the media of religious symbols such as the fall, the incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection. For Niebuhr, the opposite of pessimism--of tragedy--is not optimism, but is the "beyond tragic": the tragedy of life re-interpreted through the media of religious symbols.

History is not rational. . . . History can be meaningful, therefore, only in terms of a faith which comprehends its seeming irrationalities and views them as the expression of a divine wisdom, which transcends human understanding.²

This is how "religion makes present reality bearable"—it changes nothing substantially, but gives us a mythological basis for interpreting history in a manner that does justice to history's tragic nature, while not simply leaving us there. In Niebuhr's hands, Christianity becomes implicitly a "pessimism of strength"\(^1\) --"a religion of grace which seeks to console the human spirit to its inevitable defeat in the world of nature and history.\(^2\) History has meaning only when interpreted upon the basis of a mythology; Christianity provides the mythology which Niebuhr believed had the highest potential for inspiring ethical behavior.

Not that human life is literally as these religious symbols proclaim, but it is nonetheless only from a religious point of view—a mythological point of view—that human history, that is, human life, has any meaning at all. This, in Niebuhr, is a form of perspectivalism which rejects the historical truth of traditional Christian assertions while affirming their symbolic meaning.

Niebuhr rejects a literal interpretation of the virgin birth, the incarnation, the resurrection, and personal immortality as "Biblical symbols" must be taken "seriously but not literally."\(^3\) Traditional Christian assertions of the meaning of Christ's incarnation, his resurrection, and the resurrection of believers to an afterlife are not understood by Niebuhr to have any literal connotations. The interpretations he gives to each of these doctrines is entirely abstract, merely symbolic. The incarnation asserts that the perfect

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human life must be understood as beyond the reach of mere humans—it must also be a divine life. The resurrection and the assertion of a subsequent afterlife affirms the meaning and goodness of history and physicality, but does not—for Niebuhr—literally refer to a historical event either past or future for any individual.¹

"We do not believe in the virgin birth," Niebuhr writes, and in a polite understatement continues: "We have difficulty with the physical resurrection of Christ."² He wrote in a personal letter that he had "not the slightest interest in the empty tomb or physical resurrection."³ And privately confessed: "I do not believe in personal immortality."⁴

Niebuhr does not reject these doctrines as myths, but only in their literalistic sense. But if they do not refer in some sense to historical realities, where does that leave Christianity? Its uniqueness and claim to historical truth become myth as well.

Niebuhr accepts the historicity of some of the miracles of healing Jesus is reported to have performed, on the basis of what we now know of the psychosomatic nature of human being. In Niebuhr's perspective, the lame might walk, the blind might see, but what's dead stays that way—Jesus included. In short, "revelatory events" do not "validate themselves by a

divine break-through in the natural order."¹ Under no circumstances does Niebuhr admit even the possibility of any divine interruption of the natural order. The modern scientific world view of what constitutes the "natural order" is not open to question; it is a given. This aspect of Niebuhr's thought is the basis of Richard W. Fox's conclusion that, behind the religious language, Niebuhr is nonetheless a "thoroughgoing naturalist."²

Given the presuppositions of his hermeneutics of myth, Niebuhr is necessarily required to reject any ontological relationship between the symbol and that which it signifies. It is not necessary, however, for all modern theologians to do so. In contrast to Niebuhr's symbology is that of Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner.

Roman Catholic theology, in general, has been traditionally distinguished from Protestant theology by the former's use of the analogy of being. In the case of Karl Rahner and Reinhold Niebuhr, Rahner's use of the analogy of being determines the salient difference between the two men's theologies of symbol. For Rahner, in order for a symbol to be a "symbolic reality" there must be a fundamental ontological identification--not mere perspectival participation--between the multiplicity of the "sign" and "that which is signified." Rahner focuses upon an ontological interpretation of symbol in which unity takes priority over multiplicity while Niebuhr stresses an existential-functional perspectival approach: Jesus "becomes" the symbol of God.³

³Reinhold Niebuhr, Christian Realism and Political Problems (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953) 198; Reinhold Niebuhr, The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr. Selected
In Niebuhr's view, the possibility of an ontological relationship between
God and the historical Jesus is rejected out of hand in favor of an abstract
incarnation which has no concrete necessary relationship to history.

Rahner's theology of symbol is almost entirely outlined in only one
article. It is a difficult article to read and is made more difficult by the
terms chosen to communicate his distinctions between "symbolic
representations" (corresponding to Niebuhr's use of the word "symbol") and
"symbolic realities" (Rahner's "Realsymbol"). In English translations of the
article, the English term "symbol" is often used to denote either meaning of
the term.1 This leads to confusion. To avoid these problems I will use the
German term "Realsymbol" to denote Rahner's interpretation of a "symbolic
reality" and attempt to make plain its distinction from "symbolic
representations" each time the word is used.

In Rahner's 1959 monograph, "On the Theology of the Symbol", he begins
his explication with two major assertions: (1) "The basic principle of an
ontology of symbolism [is that]... all beings are by their nature symbolic,
because they necessarily 'express' themselves in order to attain their own
nature"; and (2) "the symbol strictly speaking (symbolic reality) is the self-
realization of a being in the other, which is constitutive of its essence."2 The
first statement applies to both symbolic representations and "Realsymbole";
the second is the qualitative distinction which sets the "Realsymbol" apart

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1 Whether the translation in Theological Investigations or the translation in
McCool's A Rahner Reader is used.

2 Karl Rahner. Theological Investigations Vol. 4, translated by Kevin Smith
from the mere "symbolic representation." Rahner's theology of symbol is an "ontology of symbolism" which proposes an ontological relationship between "sign" and "that which is signified" as symbolism is intrinsic to being itself, but it is only in the "Realsymbol" that there is an ontological identity shared by "sign" and "signified." This is an expression of what Anne Carr calls Rahner's principle of unity-in-difference which "sets the pattern for Rahner's approach to theological questions and for the systematic coherence of his thought."¹ Each being can be symbolic of itself because of its inherent multiplicity (difference), while the truly symbolic is only possible where this ontological relationship between multiplicities exists (unity). "All beings... are multiple, and are or can be essentially the expression of another in this unity of the multiple and one."²

Rahner distinguishes 'really genuine symbols ('symbolic realities') from merely arbitrary 'signs', 'signals', and 'codes' ('symbolic representations')."³ In Rahner's view, a symbol, that is, a "Realsymbol", is

"the highest and most primordial manner in which one reality can represent another... renders another presenti (primarily 'for itself' and only secondarily for others), a symbol [is] the representation which allows the other 'to be there'."⁴

The dividing line between "symbolic realities" and "symbolic representations" is that in a "Realsymbol" the "sign" and "that which is signified" are so closely related that in the former the latter is made truly

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³Rahner, op. cit., p. 121.
⁴Rahner, op. cit., p. 122.
present, has been self-realized in the other; despite their multiplicity, "sign" and "signified" are "one."

In Niebuhr's view, myth depicts sign and signified to be one, but in reality they are not—they are only perceived by their religious interpreters to be unified. Niebuhr's understanding of symbol is thus merely perspectival (there is no ontological unity-in-difference), whereas Rahner's symbology is capable of affirming both a perspectival understanding (symbolic representations) and an ontological interpretation (symbolic realities: "Realsymbole").

Rahner's distinction between "symbolic representations" and "symbolic realities" ("Realsymbole") brings up a difficulty in his theology of symbol. If all being is intrinsically symbolic due to its unity in multiplicity, how is it—as Rahner asserts—that only some things are symbolic of other things? Why are some things "Realsymbole" while others are merely symbolic representations—symbols in only the conventional sense of the term?

The concept of a being is 'analogous', that is, it displays the various types of self-realization of each being, and being in itself, and hence also the concept and reality of the symbol are flexible. But because these are necessarily given with the general concept of beings and being—as the 'unveiled' figure of the most primordial 'truth' of being—the symbol shares the 'analogia entis' with being which it symbolizes.¹

In Rahner's view the distinction between the symbolism inherent in being and the symbolism characteristic of a "Realsymbol" is not one of degree. The elements of a symbolic representation are related by the analogy of being (all being is related this way); the elements of a "Realsymbol" are multiple and yet share an ontological identity, something

¹Rahner, op. cit., p. 126.
which includes and surpasses an analogical relationship. A "Realsymbol" may be a symbolic representation also, but a symbolic representation does not become a "Realsymbol". One thing is the "Realsymbol" of another due to their shared ontological identity. It is a case of either/or, not a case of becoming. Things, persons, events may become symbolic representations when persons interpret them as such, but something is a "Realsymbol" by virtue of its ontological status alone.

It is the ontological identity of "sign" with "signified" that characterizes a "Realsymbol"; all else are merely symbolic representations. All being is related analogically, but the elements of a "Realsymbol" are related such that the one is truly present in the other. The fundamental characteristic of Rahner's theology of "Realsymbol" is the assertion of this ontological "unity-in-difference" between the "sign" and the "thing signified." A true symbolic reality thus "renders another present primarily 'for itself' and only secondarily for others." A "Realsymbol" is intrinsically a "Realsymbol" and requires no human interpreter to complete its identity as a symbol. As Buckley interprets Rahner, "events, persons, and things do not have a symbolic quality; they are symbols."¹

Rahner's understanding of "Realsymbol" is rooted in the concept of the Trinity and the relations among the three Persons: "the attentive reader, especially if trained in theology, will not have failed to remark that the thought of the mystery of the Trinity was the constant background of the

ontological considerations.\textsuperscript{1} It is the \textit{Logos} which is the supreme form of the theology of symbol:

The \textit{Logos} is the 'symbol' of the Father, in the very sense which we have given the word: the inward symbol which remains distinct from what is symbolized, which is constituted by what is symbolized, where what is symbolized expresses itself and possesses itself.\textsuperscript{2}

The paradigm of Rahner's concept of "Realsymbol" is the unity-in-difference of the Trinity, particularly the Logos' ontological unity with the Father—"the incarnate word is the absolute symbol of God in the world."\textsuperscript{3} The Persons of the Trinity are "Realsymbole" of each other and the \textit{Logos} is the "\textit{Realsymbol} par excellence" of God. The sacraments are "Realsymbole" of Christ; and the Church, as his "Realsymbol", is the contemporaneous expression of his incarnation. Rahner's understanding of symbol thus begins with the assertion of the ontological reality of symbol rather than with the human existential experience of the revelatory function of symbol.

In Rahner's thought, religious symbols are explained by ontology, Niebuhr seeks to interpret their existential meaning without metaphysical considerations. Niebuhr's understanding of myth and symbol is constructed so as to be immune from the claims of historical truth, whereas "Rahner's symbols not only permit but require truth-claims."\textsuperscript{4}

A viable alternative to Niebuhr's understanding of the relationship of myth (or symbol) to history can be found not only in Karl Rahner's work but in the work of Protestant theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg. Niebuhr rejects

\textsuperscript{2}Rahner, op. cit., p. 236.
\textsuperscript{3}Rahner, op. cit., p. 237.
\textsuperscript{4}Buckley, op. cit., p. 467.
any literal interpretation of the resurrection on the grounds that it violates
what science tells us is incontrovertible natural law; Pannenberg argues that
it is not that simple.

The possibility of the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection has been
opposed on the grounds that the resurrection of a dead person even in
the sense of the resurrection to imperishable life would be an event
that violates the laws of nature. Therefore, resurrection as a historical
event is impossible. Yet it appears that from the perspective of the
presuppositions of modern physics judgments must be made much
more carefully. First, only a part of the laws of nature are ever
known. Further, in a world that as a whole represents a singular
irreversible process, an individual event is never completely
determined by natural laws. Conformity to law embraces only one
aspect of what happens. From another perspective, everything that
happens is contingent, and the validity of the laws of nature is itself
contingent. Therefore, natural science expresses the general validity
of the laws of nature must at the same time declare its own inability
to make definitive judgments about the possibility or impossibility of
an individual event, regardless of how certainly it is able at least in
principle, to measure the probability of an event’s occurrence. The
judgment about whether an event, however unfamiliar, has happened
is in the final analysis a matter for the historian and cannot be
prejudged by the knowledge of natural science.1

Pannenberg espouses that the ground of Jesus’ unity with God is
established “only by his resurrection from the dead.”2 In Niebuhr’s view, the
resurrection is an “idea whose truth is ultimately independent of the history
of Jesus” whereas Pannenberg states that

the basis of the knowledge of Jesus’ significance remains bound to the
original apocalyptic horizon of Jesus’ history, which at the same time
has also been modified by this history. If this horizon is eliminated,
the basis of faith is lost; then Christology becomes mythology and no

1Wolfhart Pannenberg. Jesus--God and Man, translated by Lewis L. Wilkens and
2Pannenberg, op. cit., p. 53.
longer has true continuity with Jesus himself and with the witness of the apostles.¹

This is in fact what has occurred in Niebuhr's thinking.

Nonetheless, it must be noted that the conception of the resurrection which Pannenberg affirms and Niebuhr rejects differ substantially. The concept of the resurrection of both Jesus and the individual believer which Niebuhr rejects is the concept of the resurrection in its crudest most literal form: the revivification of a corpse. Pannenberg also rejects this interpretation and convincingly argues that it is rejected also in the New Testament canon. What resurrection means, Pannenberg says, is far more subtle than this crude view which Niebuhr rejects.

It is, however, absolutely certain that the resurrection of the dead was not understood in this way [as the literal revivification of a corpse] in the primitive Christian and, in any case, in the oldest, the Pauline, concept. For Paul, resurrection means the new life of a new body, not the return of life into a dead but not yet decayed fleshly body. . . . The future body will be a different one from the present body, not a fleshly body but—as he says—a "spiritual body". . . . Paul understood the resurrection of the dead, and so also the resurrection of Jesus, not as mere resuscitation of a corpse but as radical transformation.²

Pannenberg readily admits that the resurrection of the dead is a metaphor as "the intended reality is beyond the expression of the man who lives this side of death."³ The resurrection, however, is not "merely symbolic"⁴; it is grounded in history. Pannenberg believes that the resurrection appearances recorded in the New Testament, despite legendary features, have a "good historical foundation": "the Easter faith of the

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¹Pannenberg, op. cit., p. 83.
²Pannenberg, op. cit., pp. 75, 77.
³Pannenberg, op. cit., p. 75.
⁴Pannenberg, op. cit., p. 86.
disciples is to be explained from the [resurrection] appearances,” not vice versa.¹

However, “if the historian approaches his work with the conviction that ‘the dead do not rise,’ then it has already been decided that Jesus also has not risen”² -- and neither will the individual believer--this is precisely Niebuhr’s position. The adoption of such a position, in Pannenberg’s view, means that a faith in continuity with the confession of the primitive Church is no longer possible as the ground of Jesus’ unity with God is established “only by the resurrection from the dead”--a resurrection which was a radical transformation in history of the whole person of Jesus.

For Niebuhr, religious symbols such as the resurrection are the metaphorical content of an aesthetic interpretation of life which alone justifies our existence.³ “The truth which is revealed in Christ must be apprehended in faith. Faith as far as it uses our natural endowments, draws on poetic and imaginative capacities rather than rational ones.”⁴ It is not upon rational, metaphysical, or historical grounds that Niebuhr affirms the meaning of human life; but upon symbolic--that is, artistic, aesthetic--grounds. Meaning is found upon the suprarational basis of faith: “An adequate philosophy of history must . . . be a mythology rather than a

¹Pannenberg, op. cit., pp. 91, 96.
²Pannenberg, op. cit., p. 97.
philosophy.... [as] meaning can be attributed to history only by a
mythology."1

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.... Reason cannot function without the
presuppositions of faith.... Every search for truth begins with a
presupposition of faith.2

Niebuhr certainly agreed with Friedrich Nietzsche's statement that
"without myth every culture loses the healthy natural power of its
creativity: only a horizon defined by myths completes and unifies a whole
cultural environment."3 In fact, Niebuhr seems to have worked significant
portions of the schema of Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy into the framework of
the dilemma of the Christian in the modern world. The believer reinterprets
the pessimism of modern history with the aid of the illusions provided by
Christian symbolism.

The architecture of Niebuhr's thought consists of dialectical relationships,
the most overarching of which is the dialectic between faith and reason, the
gospel and the world, the suprarational and the rational. Niebuhr combines
in himself respect for the rationality of empirical science with what he calls
the suprarationality of religious faith. He strived to reconcile the gospel with
the modern scientific world view.

1Reinhold Niebuhr, Reflections on the End of an Era (New York: Charles
Scribner's Sons, 1934) 122, 123.
2Reinhold Niebuhr, Christianity and Power Politics (New York: Charles
Scribner's sons, 1940) 204, 220, 221; Reinhold Niebuhr, The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr,
Selected Essays and Addresses, Robert McAfee Brown, ed. (New York and London: Yale
3Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, Walter
But in order to do so, and despite his lip service to the need for
metaphysics, he tacitly rejected the metaphysical ground of his religious
faith. What we know for sure, we know upon empirical grounds, all else is
non-literal, symbolic. Christianity, from Niebuhr's view, was less how the
world is, and more how you interpret the world—but nonetheless an
interpretation which "does more justice to the facts" than other
interpretations.

In Niebuhr's view, the value of religion, what civilization needs religion
for, is not to tell us what the world is--science can better accomplish that--
but to tell us what the world means and thus how to behave ethically in it.
Religion is needed for the ethical direction it alone can offer. The ability of
religion to inspire ethical conduct is its greatest value. But "religion is
always forced to choose between an adequate metaphysics and an adequate
ethics." Niebuhr erected an ethical system upon the basis of what he
considered a mythical interpretation of existence and rejected metaphysical
speculation about traditional Christian doctrines.

The structure of Niebuhr's theology can be understood as two interrelated
dialectics. First there is the overarching dialectic of the ideal and the real,
faith and reason, the suprarational and the rational. The real is that which
is true in a literal non-symbolic sense: what we know on the basis of
scientific empirical observation. This knowledge gives us criteria whereby
we know that certain religious assertions are mythological, not literally

1Reinhold Niebuhr. Does Civilization Need Religion? A Study in the Social
Resources and Limitations of Religion in Modern Life (New York: The
Macmillan Company, 1927) 190.

2Reinhold Niebuhr. Does Civilization Need Religion? A Study in the Social
Resources and Limitations of Religion in Modern Life (New York: The
historical; mythological assertions about reality are suprarational. But reason alone can only go so far. It can give us knowledge about how the world is, but not how it should or ought to be. Reason alone can tell us what it is to be a human being, but not what it means.

In order to interpret what it means to be human, mythological suprarational presuppositions are needed. Religion supplies these. Through our mythological illusions we interpret the world as having been created by a good God. Human beings, however, in their wrongful exercise of freedom, lost their essential perfection. But in order to restore this perfection, God's Son became incarnate, lived a perfect human life, died a redemptive death, and was bodily resurrected soon after. In Niebuhr's view, to be a Christian is to "apprehend," to "recognize," to "regard" the world according to these mythological presuppositions.

This suprarational side of Niebuhr's overarching dialectic is also divided into dialectical halves: the anthropological and the christological. The anthropological pessimism of original sin is wedded to the hope of grace contained in Niebuhr's abstract merely symbolic christology in which the historical Jesus of Nazareth has been all but nominally replaced by the Christ of faith who becomes symbol of what it means to be a perfect human being.

Too often, thinkers have not taken seriously and consistently enough the dialectical nature of Niebuhr's thought and have prematurely seized a systematic method for interpreting Niebuhr which does not reflect the tension inherent in Niebuhr's hermeneutic—his mythical method of interpretation.

Graphically, Niebuhr's thought is not best illustrated as a circle or sphere with one distinct center—an ellipse with its dual foci is a better method of
conceiving the relationship, not only between Niebuhr's anthropology and christology, but the dialectical nature of his thought as a whole. The dual foci of an ellipse more accurately represents a dialectical relationship. A circle with one center, however, or the idea of a foundation upon which a structure is built, implies a clear single direction of cause and effect rather than a truly dialectical relationship.

Understood in this fashion, Niebuhr appears to have been significantly influenced by Nietzsche's interpretation of Attic tragedy. In order to reconcile the gospel and the world, Niebuhr has rejected the traditional metaphysical assertions of Christianity as "rationally absurd." In their place he accepts scientific rationality, our modern "Socratism," and combines it with the artistry of the mythological heritage of Christianity. Through the mythological illusions of Christianity, life is made "bearable" by revealing to us the beauty in our tragedy1; even as Attic Tragedy did for the ancient Greeks.

But for either interpretation of existence to be viable it must be understood as being in some sense true--not merely one way of interpreting the world. In either case, if myth is understood to have no relationship to the perceived facts of reality--myth no longer has power to interpret that reality convincingly. If "myths" are no longer perceived as being in some sense "genuine," they no longer have power to motivate. When the traditional assertions of Christianity are understood to have no relationship at all to literal truth, the traditional Christian understanding of God is mortally wounded.

Niebuhr's thought is clearly capable of reconciling his understanding of the gospel with the world, but Niebuhr's world remains unchanged while his gospel is transformed into one interpretation among many, and saved from unqualified relativism by Niebuhr's assertion of its superior ethical value. This ethical power, however, rests upon taking the substance of Christian myths as being more than merely symbolic. If the traditional doctrines of Christianity are not true in some metaphysical sense, then Christianity is defenseless against a critique such as Nietzsche's *Antichrist* which accuses Christianity of nihilism. Niebuhr, without a basis for asserting that Christianity’s traditional doctrines are even (in some limited sense) literally true, has no basis other than intuition for asserting the greater ethical value of Christianity. Niebuhr’s ethics finds its greatest value when joined with theological presuppositions other than Niebuhr’s; otherwise, the structure of Niebuhr’s ethics collapses upon his inadequate theological base.

Essentially, the experience of grace in religion is the *apprehension* of the absolute from the perspective of the relative. The unachieved is in some sense *felt* to be achieved or realized. The sinner is "justified" even though his sin is not overcome. The world, as revealed in its processes of nature, is known to be imperfect, and yet it is *recognized* as a creation of God. Man is *regarded* as both a sinner and a child of God. In these paradoxes true religion makes present reality bearable even while it insists that God is denied, frustrated and defied in the immediate situation.¹

BIBLIOGRAPHY


