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An Introduction to the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr

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THE NIEBUHR FAMILY has been to recent American theology what the Kennedy family became for American politics. Reinhold at Union, Richard at Yale, and Richard Reinhold at Harvard have all made significant contributions to the theological enterprise. Moreover, the Niebuhr women, by blood and by marriage, like the Kennedy women, by blood and by marriage, have established themselves by their own accomplishments. Ursula, the wife of Reinhold, and Hulda, the sister of Richard and Reinhold, are well known for their teaching and writing. The purpose of this paper is to provide an introduction to the life and thought of one member of this gifted family, H. Richard Niebuhr, the brother of Reinhold and the father of Richard Reinhold.

H. Richard Niebuhr was born September 3, 1894, at Wright City, Missouri, the son of a clergyman of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, who, according to Reinhold, "combined a vital personal piety with a complete freedom in theological studies. He introduced his sons and daughters to the thought of Harnack without fully sharing the liberal convictions of that theologian."¹ Liston Pope notes² that as boys Richard and Reinhold played different instruments in the family ensemble. Richard played the flute while Reinhold played the trombone. However, Pope suggests that the muscular patterns involved may have had nothing to do with the kind of mannerisms and facial contortions each developed and for which both became justly famous. Be this as it may, one does wonder if the flute and trombone are not rather symbolic of the theological patterns and methods for which both also became quite well known.

Richard Niebuhr graduated from Elmhurst College in 1912 and from Eden Theological Seminary in 1915. He earned an M.A. degree at Washington University in 1917, the B.D. degree at Yale Divinity School in 1923, and the PH.D. degree at Yale University in 1924. He returned to Elmhurst College in 1924 and served as the president of that institution for three years, after which he taught at Eden Theological Seminary for four years. Finally, he moved back to Yale in the year 1931 to become Associate Professor of Christian Ethics and a full professor seven years later. He served at Yale until his death in the summer of 1962. At that time he was Sterling Professor of

1. *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, ed. Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1956), p. 3.

2. *Faith and Ethics*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), pp. 4-5.

Theology and Christian Ethics, Director of Graduate Studies in Religion, and Associate Fellow of Silliman College.

Niebuhr published only six books during his lifetime, and four of these were relatively small in size. In order of their appearance they are: *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 1929; *The Kingdom of God in America*, 1937; *The Meaning of Revelation*, 1941; *Christ and Culture*, 1951; *The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry*, 1956; and *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 1960. The first four have already attained the status of minor classics, and the last is destined to be the centre of much discussion for years to come. *The Responsible Self*, published in the fall of 1963, is an essay in Christian moral philosophy which presents a more or less systematic statement of his understanding of the basic principles of Christian ethics. In addition to these books, he has written a number of significant articles. He is generally regarded as a more careful scholar and a more precise and technical thinker than his brother. He is what one might call, not to coin a phrase, a "theologian's theologian." Many, and not all of them Yale graduates, believe him to be a more profound thinker than Reinhold and assert that his influence in the long run will be greater, although Reinhold has been the better known up to this point. Many of the ideas which came forth fresh and original from his pen have so permeated the general theological climate that students, upon being introduced directly to his thought, find that, like Shakespeare, he is full of quotations.

THE PRACTICAL CHURCHMAN AND THEOLOGIAN

As a practical churchman Niebuhr felt called to work for the reformation of the church from within, in contrast to his brother Reinhold, whom he saw in the role of seeking the reform of culture. Thus, as a man of faith speaking primarily to his fellow believers, he has sought to interpret the dialogue of the church with the world and with God revealed in Christ. The fundamental need of our time, he felt, is the reformation of religion, a rebirth of the human spirit which will satisfy the desperate and unfulfilled longings of men in our society for courage and hope. Men have become disillusioned with their idols, their nations, the spirit and promise of technological civilization, and so on. The half-gods have fallen and the real gods have not arrived. The great task of the church today is to enter that disillusioned world and minister to it with its faith in the God who creates, governs, loves, and redeems all things. If this ministry of the church is to be fulfilled, two things are necessary. First, the church must be on guard against absolutizing itself. Towards the end of his life Niebuhr was worried about the henotheism which exalted the principles of religious society. This is just as dangerous as the henotheism which exalts political or economic society or any other special interest of man. "In many circles today we have substituted for the religion-centered faith of the 19th century

a church-centered faith as though the historical and visible church were the representative of God on earth, as though the Bible were the only word that God is speaking."³ He felt that in the new orthodox movements the church is moving towards a situation against which the Reformation and the eighteenth-century revivalistic movement protested. Secondly, the church needs a resymbolization of its faith. The old phrases are worn out. New meaning needs to be put in old terms, such as "Word of God," "grace," "justification," "incarnation," or we need new terms. This resymbolization can come only out of the direct experience of God to which the symbols refer. In short, Niebuhr's concern for the reformation of the church is an expression of his deep conviction that Christianity means permanent revolution which again and again demands the renewing of mind and will and the redirection of trust and loyalty away from all finite gods, including the church and the Bible, to faith in the Sovereign Person who is the ground of all being and the source of all value.

Niebuhr's practical concern as a churchman provided unity and direction for his theological work. As a theologian Niebuhr's focus of attention, as already indicated, was on the dialogue of the church with the world and with God revealed in Christ. The way he conceived of this dialogue is ultimately rooted in his conception of the triadic nature of the life and encounters of the self. The self exists in community with other selves, and the self with its companions exists before God. However, when this analysis is made concrete from within a Christian framework, certain other factors have to be taken into consideration. The Christian exists not only in community with his fellow believers in the church, but also in community with those who share the same historical culture but not his loyalty to Christ. Thus, a double orientation is necessary. The Christian asks the question about God as a human being in companionship with all men, but he answers the question by reference to his existential commitment to Jesus Christ. Moreover, he brings to the encounter with Christ in the church ways of thinking, feeling, and acting which are relative to the particular society in which he exists. Thus, there arises the multidimensional problem for the believer of relating his existence as a Christian to his existence as a citizen of some kingdom of this world. If one examines Christianity as a religious movement, the same duality becomes evident. On the one hand, Christian faith in God gives rise to a dynamic movement which plays a creative role in society and transforms the social values by which men live.⁴ On the other hand, Christianity takes on a form peculiar to the culture in which it takes root and is moulded by a multitude of social forces which have no relationship to its own inner essence.⁵ The complex of relationships

3. "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," *The Christian Century* (March 2, 1960), p. 250.

4. See *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937).

5. See *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., Inc., 1929).

which make up the symbiotic life of the Christian who exists in the church and in a given society is in one way or another at the centre of most of Niebuhr's thinking. The concern to take into account this duality in the self's relations to its companions before God is epitomized in *Christ and Culture*, which explores the Christian's problem of relating his commitment to Christ to the life, thought, and values of the particular culture to which he belongs. This book brings together in a single focus the fundamental problems which occupied him for a lifetime.

THEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

While the basic interests and fundamental theological convictions of Niebuhr remained constant throughout most of his writing career, two sorts of shift in perspective and approach may be noted. With regard to his theological outlook, he calls attention to two periods of reorientation.⁶ In the years following 1930 Niebuhr broke decisively with the anthropocentric viewpoint of liberalism and associated himself with the crisis theology best represented by Karl Barth. The fault with liberalism was that it conceived of God as the good on the basis of his relationship to absolute values which could be defined independently of faith in him. The alternative which Niebuhr accepted affirmed as its first principle the reality of a Sovereign Person who is the trustworthy ground of all that proceeds from him. Value is to be defined by God's being and acts rather than conversely as in liberalism. Two related convictions associated with divine sovereignty became a permanent part of his thinking at that time: the idea of man's lostness and idolatry and the recognition that faith in the goodness of the ground of being is a miraculous gift of grace and not a human achievement.

A second theological change of mind occurred in the years following 1950. Niebuhr notes that he reacted against the road that Barth and others had taken in favour of a return to modes of thought associated with the theologians of religious experience such as Edwards, Schleiermacher, Coleridge, Bushnell, and, in the present scene, Bultmann. What he began to fear in Barth was the rebirth of orthodoxy, the insistence on right doctrine, the stress on Christianity as the true religion, and the assertion of the primacy of ideas over personal relations. Niebuhr's definition of faith in terms of trust and loyalty and his existentialistic concern for personal truth arising out of I-Thou encounters led him to feel that it was time for theology to resume the march represented by the ethical, empirical, and critical theology of an earlier period.

Along with these revisions in theological conviction went a change in his approach to the church-culture dialogue. What is involved here is a shift from sociological towards more theological modes of analysis. His first two books consist of an inquiry into American Christianity as a religious-social movement. One of his last is an analysis of the meaning of religious

6. "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," pp. 248-251.

faith and of its implications for man's personal and social existence. *Christ and Culture* embodies a remarkable combination of these two approaches in which Christianity is viewed in relation to culture from the standpoint of the believer who must make existential decisions regarding the relative claims of his society and of Christ. Doubtless this shift of interest away from Christianity in its objective social expression in history to concern with the meaning of faith in the life of a human self is associated with the growing importance of existentialism in his thought and with his interest in the human experience of God rather than in the doctrines which grow out of it. However, this change in approach, while significant, should not obscure the fact that one of the distinctive features of all Niebuhr's writings is the skilful way in which he interweaves sociological, historical, and theological analyses into a unified framework of interpretation which explores from various angles the situation of the self in the totality of its personal and social relationships before God.

With this general background in mind, the rest of the paper will deal primarily with the theological method of Niebuhr and his view of revelation. But the aim is to do this in such a way that his basic convictions upon some of the central Christian doctrines will be indicated.

THE CENTRAL VISION

The best approach to the theological method of Niebuhr is provided by a grasp of what may be called his central vision of man's situation in the world. Everything that he says is related in one way or another to his attempt to understand the nature, meaning, and purpose of personal existence. Niebuhr is an existentialist whose interest is first and last in the practical problem of what it means to be an existing individual in the concrete situation in which the self emerges as a free rational-moral being for whom the quest for meaning and fulfilment is a forced option. The fundamental reference for the individual in quest of the good is God, but the encounter with God always takes place in the context of the self's relations to other selves. Hence Niebuhr finds that three poles of reference must be kept constantly in mind—the self with its own uniqueness and individuality, the community of selves to which the individual is organically related, and the ground of the self's being and of all being. None of the elements in this triad can be isolated from the other two, but all must be considered in their interrelationships. When analysis is carried through in detail, a great many factors must be taken into account, and Niebuhr brings all of the intellectual resources which he came to possess in a lifetime of study and experience to the interpretation of these complexities. Nevertheless, beneath all the sociological, philosophical, and theological categories which he employs in his writings and at the root of every problem he tackles is the central vision of the self with its companions before God in quest of meaning and fulfilment.

This central vision is made explicit when Niebuhr defines how he conceives the theological enterprise.⁷ Theology, he says, like every other discipline, has its own distinctive object of study. The object in this case is God, but God can never be known in abstraction but only from the point of view of faith in him. God and faith go together in theology in much the same way as physical objects and sense experience go together in the natural sciences. Theology, then, is an inquiry about God as he is known in faith. But this definition is not yet complete. Faith is an activity of a subject or self. Theology has in view, then, as another one of its objects, the self who apprehends God in faith. Further, the self exists in companionship with other selves who also exist before God and have a relationship to him. Therefore, a complete definition of the nature of theology must take into account three elements in their interrelationships. "What is known and knowable in theology is God in relation to self and to neighbor, and self and neighbor in relation to God. This complex of related beings is the object of theology."⁸ Again he writes, "One may say that the complex object of theological study always has the three aspects of God in relation to men, of men in relation to God, and of men-before-God in relation to each other. . . ."⁹

Given this complex of objects, the task of theology may now be defined. In *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, Niebuhr suggests that the function of theology is twofold. Firstly, it develops the reasoning which is present to and characteristic of faith. It "organizes, compares, reflects, criticizes, and develops hypotheses in the midst of believing."¹⁰ Secondly, theology criticizes faith in relation to its objects. It seeks to distinguish between genuine and spurious forms of faith and to evaluate the activities in which men engage as believers in God. In *The Purpose of the Church and the Ministry*, Niebuhr refers to these two functions as they are carried on within the context of the church by the theological seminary. Theology is the exercise of the intellectual love of God which seeks understanding of the faith of the church and which reflects critically upon all that goes on in the church, such as worship, preaching, teaching, the care of souls, and social action.

It has to be further noted that in carrying out these functions, theology always has a confessional character. The reasoning in faith about God before man and man before God which is carried on by the theological enterprise is always the reasoning of some particular historical community. Niebuhr speaks from a point of view which recognizes the radical historicity and relativity of all human thinking and knowledge.

Up to this point nothing that is specifically Christian has entered into

7. *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), pp. 11-16.

8. *The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), pp. 112-113.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

10. *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, p. 13.

what has been called Niebuhr's central vision and into his definition of theology as seen from the perspective of this vision. If attention is now directed to the way in which Niebuhr looks at the problem of God and the nature of faith, the same sort of analysis can be continued up to a point without making reference to specific Christian content. Moreover, it is possible to see that what he says about these matters is rooted in his basic convictions about the existential situation of man in the world. All men, if they are to avoid nihilism and utter despair, must have a god of some sort to whom they can be related in faith. Faith here means trust in some centre and source of value, and loyalty to that which gives value to the self. God here means an object of faith, that is, a centre of value upon which men rely and to which they are loyal. Faith relations of this sort to gods so defined seem to be universal among men.¹¹ In short, it is possible to think of many kinds of faith which selves in various communities have in their differing gods. Likewise, there can be corresponding theologies which develop the reasoning present in the faith of these various communities and criticize the actions in which the believers engage. Of course, not all the faiths which men have are formally embodied in self-conscious communities with their own theological enterprises, but the point is that from the existential point of view the problem of faith and of the gods who are objects of faith is a universal one which arises out of the individual's existential situation in the world as a self in community with other selves in quest of meaning and fulfilment.

FAITH AND RADICAL MONOTHEISM

If the actual forms of faith in the Western world are examined, it appears that there are three that need to be taken into account. (1) There are various kinds of pluralism in which many gods are trusted. (2) There are various kinds of henotheism in which only one god or value centre is trusted, but this object of devotion is merely one among many. (3) There also exists in the midst of these more as hope and goal than as an actual functioning reality a form of faith which Niebuhr calls radical monotheism.¹²

At this point Niebuhr moves logically from an analysis of the universal problem of faith arising out of man's existential situation into the confessional framework of Christian theology. We must turn to his conception of the nature of radical monotheism and to the way in which this form of faith is elicited in the Christian community. His normative conviction may be stated briefly: Christianity involves a permanent revolution whereby men are constantly called away from finite gods and idolatrous centres of value to the One beyond the many who is the very principle of being and of value. The testimony of Christians is that this radical trust in and loyalty to the Sovereign God becomes a reality for men in existential encounter

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-23.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 24-37.

with Jesus Christ as he is known in the church and that it happens by the grace of God and as a miraculous gift. The event in which this conversion to radical faith takes place in the church and in personal existence is what Christians mean by revelation.

What Niebuhr intends by the term radical monotheism, which has come into use by him and by those talking about his theology, is also indicated by the term divine sovereignty. This note has been characteristic of his theology since the early thirties, that is, about the time that he broke with liberalism. Of that period in his life he says, "And now I came to understand that unless being itself, the constitution of things, the One beyond all the many, the ground of my being and of all being was trustworthy—could be counted on by all that proceeded from it—I had no God at all."¹³ As a form of faith, then, radical monotheism involves utter reliance upon the ultimate ground of all things, recognition that whatever is is good because it is valued by the ultimate, and unstinting loyalty to the realm of being and to the principle of being which is its source. Speaking philosophically, radical monotheism involves two basic affirmations about the nature of God.¹⁴ He is being; that is, he is not simply another in the series of finite things but being itself, the very principle and ground of all being. And God is Person; that is, the ultimate upon which men rely in radical faith can be thought of in no other way than as a Faithful Self. The trustworthiness which the self encounters is that of a Person, a *Thou* not an *it*. All attempts to think about God in impersonal terms, necessary as they may be for some purposes, finally miss the essential quality of the experience of God. This essential quality is that the ground of being is faithful, loyal, loving, reliable, as only a self can be. The Sovereign One is a Person. Niebuhr is willing to take all the risks that are involved in the anthropomorphism that this suggests, and he injects a reminder that he is speaking of the practical reasoning of the self involved in working out its existential relations to other finite selves and to the Infinite Self and not of the theoretical reasoning of a detached mind which abstracts from this experience in which God is known and seeks to describe God as he is in himself. Standing in the Kantian tradition, Niebuhr denies the competence of theoretical reason to describe things as they are in themselves, and in this sense he is a metaphysical agnostic.

As to how radical faith comes about, it must be said that Niebuhr believes that all men have some sort of existential relationship to the ground of all things. Since being itself is the source of all finite selves and things, it is the inescapable Other that creates and rules and in whose hands men ultimately are, regardless of how they conceive it with the mind, if it is given a name at all. Men may regard this power, existentially if not intellectually, simply as mysterious void or as indifferent power or as the enemy who is hostile and from whom they must escape. Being thus re-

13. "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 248.

14. *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, pp. 42-48.

lated to the ground of all things, men tend to turn for help to some finite centre of power and value. This is the religion of the natural man, which is always polytheistic or at best henotheistic.

But there is another possibility—a radical monotheism in which one is enabled to trust the primordial power, to confess its goodness, and to become loyal to it and to all that is. As a Christian Niebuhr confesses that this miracle has come about through encounter with Jesus Christ. He does not affirm that radical faith is impossible outside the Christian community, but he does say that when he examines his own faith and the faith of others, he finds that Jesus Christ was there when the miracle occurred and that had he not been there, faith would not have been converted from the many to the One.¹⁵

REVELATION AND THE MEANING OF CHRIST

The encounter with Jesus Christ whereby men are converted from their polytheistic and henotheistic commitments to radical trust in the ground of being as a Faithful Self and to loyalty to the whole realm of being introduces the problem of the meaning of revelation. Revelation is the gift of the meeting between God as Infinite Person and men as finite persons which takes place in a community of believers which remembers Jesus Christ as the Son of God who mediates between God and men. At this point, the whole range of problems associated with the radical historicity of human existence comes swarming to the surface. The principal conviction of Niebuhr in this regard is that, while the existential encounter with being itself is a universal fact transcending cultural differences, men always experience God concretely as selves who have been formed by their participation in some community of selves at some particular time and place. The experience of God is always mediated through history; that is, every personal encounter with God takes place in the context of some given community and occurs to a person whose very selfhood has been actualized in its relations to other selves who share the same communal history. This is the meaning of historical relativity. Men can think and speak about God only as communal and historical beings whose ways of thinking, feeling, and acting have been radically conditioned by a particular society with its own specific past. When Christians refer to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, they refer to something which has happened within the communal history of believers. "Theology, then, must begin in Christian history and with Christian history because it has no other choice; in this sense it is forced to begin with revelation, meaning by that word simply historic faith."¹⁶

But now a further step has to be taken. When Christians refer to an event

15. The most eloquent passage in which Niebuhr speaks of the coming of faith by the gift and grace of God is found in *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), pp. 254-255.

16. *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1941), pp. 21-22.

in their communal past as being revelatory of God, they do not mean that a dispassionate investigation of this event by a historian will reveal the uniqueness of Christ. Rather, it is necessary to distinguish between two very distinct modes of historical knowledge. History may mean the past as it is known by the spectator who looks at it from the outside to determine the patterns of development, the causal relationships, and the immanent structures which become apparent to a disinterested, inquiring mind. When the events which make up the Christian past are examined in this way, the revelatory dimension is dissolved, and Jesus of Nazareth becomes a man among other men of his time who belong to a complex of occurrences which can be fully interpreted without residue by the use of the same categories which are employed to interpret all other events. While the interpretation that emerges will reflect the historically relative and culturally conditioned point of view of the historian making the investigation, it will not yield the Christian view of the meaning and significance of Christ as the unique mediator between God and man. This view of the past from the outside by a neutral observer is what Niebuhr calls external history. However, history can be known from the inside by a participant who remembers certain events because of the existential significance they have for him. When Christians recall Jesus of Nazareth and speak of him as the Son of God, they are pointing to the personal meaning which he has for them as selves who are seeking for a faith by which to live. The significance of Jesus Christ for the believer is not that once upon a time there was a human-divine being possessed of supernatural power and knowledge but that he is a decisive factor in the existential encounter between the believer and God here and now. If it be asked how an event in the chronological past can be of existential import now, the answer is that this past occurrence is present in the individual and communal memory of believers and therefore qualifies contemporary experience. The past as it is seen from within by selves and communities who have been vitally affected by the events that are recalled is what Niebuhr calls internal history, and it is this history which is correlated with revelation.

Some of the consequences and implications of this understanding of revelation need to be briefly noted. First of all, since Jesus Christ can be known as the revealer of God only from within the church, the only theological method that is possible is a confessional one. Christians can only tell the story of their lives, recalling what has happened to them and how faith in the goodness of the ultimate ground of being has become possible for them through the mediation of Jesus Christ. It is not possible to prove any of these affirmations to the outsider, since all human argument proceeds from some relative standpoint. No refinement of logic or progression of discursive reasoning can lead one from an observing to a participating point of view. This requires a leap of faith, a decision which transcends all rational processes. Secondly, what revelation provides is an encounter with God as person, not new information about God. All the conceptual content of

Christian theology is the product of man's creative rationality and is therefore historically and culturally conditioned. The effect of revelation, then, is not to enlarge the store of man's theoretical knowledge but to transform the existential meaning of the ideas that men already have. However, while revelation adds no new data, it does provide the centre from which all reasoning proceeds. When the ultimate is experienced as sovereign love, then all things are seen in a different light, and the data which men already have are given a new meaning for them. In this sense, the revelatory encounter is the most rational moment in life because it provides a faith perspective which views all the events of private and public life in the light of the governing and redeeming activity of sovereign love, and thus a pattern is provided which gives unity, direction, and purpose to the whole drama of man's earthly pilgrimage. Revelation provides reason the first principles it needs in order to do its work, and it enables men to understand what was unintelligible when they reasoned in the light of their henotheistic and polytheistic faiths.

Finally, while the knowledge that Christians have is not absolute, it is a view of the absolute. Men need not doubt the reality of what they see merely because their perspective is a limited one. Yet the recognition of historical relativity does mean that Christians are prohibited from asserting that men cannot come to monotheistic faith outside the Christian framework. The believer can testify to what is real to him and invite others to share his faith but he cannot derive absolute and universal principles from his own existential commitment which he then declares to be normative for all men.

In conclusion, it can be said that beginning with a central vision of selves in confrontation with each other and with the ground of their being and in search of authentic existence, Niebuhr has described as Christianly normative a radical faith which involves trust in and loyalty to a sovereign Self who knows and loves and cares for all that proceeds from him. This form of faith is never perfectly or permanently found among men, but it does actually become incarnate in life through the mediation of Jesus Christ as he is known in the church. This encounter sets men on a new path which involves them in constant repentance for their faithlessness and disloyalty. To experience this miraculous gift of trust in God and to undergo this permanent revolution of life and thought is the essence of what it means to be a Christian.