

Comprehensive Examination #4

Faith and Culture:

H. Richard Niebuhr

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Trace Niebuhr's theological development from Social Sources to the posthumous writings with special attention to points of strong continuity and points of major change.

Though Niebuhr's first published book was The Social Sources of Denominationalism in 1929, it seems appropriate to provide an outline of his intellectual development before this period. I agree with Jon Diefenthaler's assessment of Niebuhr's life as a multidimensional but organic whole; his lifelong intellectual and professional interests were an outgrowth of his personal life. Niebuhr was born a second-generation German-American and his early career was devoted to an intentional support for assimilation, though German was his first language (an obvious benefit to his scholarship throughout his career). Niebuhr's father, Gustav, was an aggressive reformer and pastor in his own right and an active proponent of Social Gospel perspectives. The Evangelical Synod which Niebuhr grew up in was a German immigrant denomination that looked to both Luther and Calvin as well as the Pietists for its theological foundation.

Niebuhr's education was marked by the breadth later reflected in his scholarship. Following his seminary training at Eden Seminary, Niebuhr completed an M.A. thesis on a German poet as well as further study in the social sciences before moving on to Yale Divinity School for the Ph.D. He was an active reformer at Elmhurst College and at Eden during his early career, pressing issues of ecumenism,

racial inclusiveness, and assimilation (i.e., use of the English language). Niebuhr also experienced personal tragedy during this period of his life; his father's premature death and a drowning accident during his brief St. Louis pastorate left Niebuhr with an intense awareness of the precariousness of human existence.

The Social Sources of Denominationalism represented Niebuhr's effort to deconstruct the theological rationale normally advanced as the primary cause of denominationalism. Making full use of the social scientific tools he had at hand, Niebuhr demonstrated that the divisions that mark Christianity, especially American Protestantism, are the result more of socio-economic factors than of theological ones. In 1930 Niebuhr took his first sabbatical, which included a long trip to Europe. Niebuhr continued to broaden his intellectual horizons by sitting in on lectures given by many of the leading German theologians, including Karl Barth and Paul Tillich. While Niebuhr was disappointed with much of what he saw happening in Germany, he was impressed by Tillich's honest efforts at addressing the questions raised by the modern world. Niebuhr also spent some time in the Soviet Union examining the Russian experiment with socialism, which deepened his interest in a Marxian approach to social analysis.

Niebuhr's next book, The Church against the World (1935), reflected his continuing dissatisfaction with the

condition of the church. He called for a revolt against both the world and the worldly church; during this period he looked to the monastics as representing an appropriate strategy for the church's renewal. Only by withdrawing from its complicity with the world could the church hope to recover a sense of identity based on the historic gospel faith. The language of The Church against the World clearly reflected Niebuhr's sympathy for Marxian rhetoric; he described Christian identity in terms of revolution and radical faith and praxis. But Niebuhr's views of the church were being transformed at other levels as well, and his next book, The Kingdom of God in America (1937), sought to explore "the movement behind the forms" of Christianity. Niebuhr believed that his socio-economic critique in The Social Sources of Denominationalism was only one of the possible approaches to the problem, that this perspective needed to be balanced with another one that could account for the theological self-understanding present within the various particular expressions of Christianity. Niebuhr argued that Christianity is both a this-worldly and an other-worldly phenomenon, and that these two dimensions must be held together in creative tension.

In many ways The Meaning of Revelation (1941) was a summary theological statement for Niebuhr. In this closely argued, finely honed book Niebuhr sought to bring together several theological convictions that had been growing for

many years. The Meaning of Revelation is a book that can be read on several levels. On a personal level, Niebuhr wanted to acknowledge the particularity of his own religious identity and to present an approach to theology that is confessional and constructive without being exclusive. On an historical level, the book presented a framework within which to understand his two major works on American Protestantism--The Social Sources of Denominationalism and The Kingdom of God in America--as representing, respectively, external history and internal history. On a theological level, Niebuhr provided a novel synthesis of historical relativism and radical monotheism which led him to assert that revelation is that part of our internal history which illuminates the rest of it and which is not entirely discontinuous with external history. The Meaning of Revelation also reflected Niebuhr's theological journey out of liberalism and its anthropocentrism, through neoorthodoxy and its Christocentrism, and into his own unique style of radically theocentric faith.

The Meaning of Revelation was published just before the United States entered World War II, and the following decade was a difficult time for Niebuhr. The war resurfaced the conflicting loyalties that Niebuhr, as a German-American, had already experienced twenty-five years earlier. Several other traumatic experiences, including the painful divorce of his daughter, left Niebuhr hospitalized for

depression. After the war Niebuhr's concern for church and society was brought to the fore again, as he found himself confronted by the Cold War and McCarthyism as well as by a religious "revival" and growing interest in ecumenism.

Christ and Culture (1951) was more than just a typology of Christian attitudes toward religion and culture; it can also be seen as an account of Niebuhr's own religious journey. His early stance toward society, as evidenced in The Church against the World, was clearly that of the group he identifies as radicals, the "Christ Against Culture" camp. In Christ and Culture he also admits to a sympathy for the dualist position ("Christ and Culture in Paradox"), a position that reflects the tension in his Evangelical Synod background and that seems to be evident in his wartime writings. But by 1951 Niebuhr had aligned himself with the conversionist position ("Christ the Transformer of Culture"), and it is clear that he believed the time was right to move from a stance of creative withdrawal to one of constructive engagement. The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry (1956) reflected a shift in another area of his thought. Whereas earlier in his career Niebuhr's reforming agenda sought institutional union as a means to a more effective Christian witness, during the forties and fifties he came to realize that structural ecumenism was less important than functional ecumenism. The real church is a community of the Spirit, not an institution or an ideal.

At the end of his life, Niebuhr's writings showed him moving from the role of reformer and activist to that of theologian and philosopher. Taken together, Faith on Earth (1950s), Radical Monotheism and Western Culture (1960), and The Responsible Self (1962) were a kind of summary of his theological understanding. Faith on Earth was a phenomenological study of faith as a human reality, while in Radical Monotheism and Western Culture Niebuhr explored the implications of divine sovereignty as a transcendent reality. The Responsible Self, the closest we will come to the definitive text on ethics that Niebuhr might have produced had he lived longer, brought together the human and the transcendent, the relative and the absolute, and suggested an ethics of response as an appropriate way for understanding divine-human interaction.

There is some variation in the ways Niebuhr and his interpreters have evaluated the nature of his theological development. In this 1960 autobiographical essay, Niebuhr began by commenting that the most important influences on his theological perspective were personal experiences. He then pointed to the thirties as a decisive period (the conviction of God's sovereignty) but also observed that the fifties saw him moving back toward interests and attitudes often associated with nineteenth-century liberalism. James Fowler and most others accept this reading of Niebuhr's career and place him with others of that generation who were

influenced by Barth and the crisis theology. R. Melvin Keiser even goes so far as to suggest that Niebuhr experienced a dramatic "conversion experience" (with neoorthodoxy) in 1930. At the other extreme, Diefenthaler argues that Niebuhr's life was one of gradual change that reflected his open and broad interests, and which began in early life and continued into his later career. I go along with Niebuhr in suggesting that personal experiences were very important, certainly more so than any of his interpreters have allowed. Because Niebuhr was also an intensely private person, this aspect of his life will always be difficult to assess; all of his personal papers and correspondence from the last thirty years of his life have apparently been destroyed.

Perhaps the most striking thing about Niebuhr's career is the continuity in the interests he pursued. His concern for church and society, for the relationship between faith and culture, was present in everything he did. Whatever problem he addressed himself to, he consistently assumed a perspective that was historical and phenomenological, and he grounded himself in the conviction of a radical monotheistic faith. Niebuhr's methodology was multidisciplinary and synthesizing; these were also qualities of his very person, as he endeavored to be an "organic intellectual," one whose personal life and style of writing were entirely consistent with the questions he was writing about.

Although Niebuhr died before the development of explicit liberation theologies, the theological change that began in the 1960s had certain anticipations in his theology. Construct a dialogue between Niebuhr and one or more forms of liberation theology. Show his likely points of approval and critique, giving reasons for your assumptions.

Given the nature of Niebuhr's theological perspective, methodology, and interests, it is worth speculating about what his untimely death in 1962 meant for the theological world. While Niebuhr was alive to witness the early Civil Rights movement, American involvement in southeast Asia, and the call for the second Vatican Council, he missed much of the social and religious upheaval that marked the period of time we often refer to as the sixties. He was not alive to see the Black Power movement, the Vietnam War, the assassinations of black and white political leaders, or the rise of the counter-culture. More importantly (for our present purposes), he missed the dramatic events of Vatican II; the rise of Latin American Liberation Theology, Black Theology and other theologies of liberation; and the "death-of-God" theology. I am convinced that there is much in Niebuhr's theology which displays a strong affinity for liberation theologies; I will construct a dialogue between Niebuhr and James Cone (as a representative of Black Theology) and Gustavo Gutierrez (as a representative of Latin American Liberation Theology) in order to demonstrate this. I will consider four specific themes as a way of structuring the dialogue: the relationship between theory

and practice, the importance of context for methodology, the role of social analysis, and the doctrine of God.

Niebuhr offers several different definitions for theology and ethics in his various writings. In one context he describes theology as critical reflection on the life of faith (which, for him, specifically includes the activity of faith), and in another context he describes it as the intellectual part of a way of life. He describes ethics as critical reflection on moral action, a definition that immediately brings to mind Gutierrez's dictum that theology is critical reflection on praxis. Niebuhr's understanding of Christian faith as an organic whole of reflection and action is clearly sympathetic to a liberation theology perspective, and it may be that the only real difference grows out of the fact that Niebuhr is working out of a traditional distinction between theology and ethics, wherein he understands theology as reflection on the action and nature of God and ethics as reflection on human response to the action and nature of God. For Niebuhr, theology has priority over ethics, but he is also unwilling to engage in any kind of abstract metaphysical speculation. Reflection precedes but also presupposes action.

One interpreter calls Niebuhr's work "autobiographical" theology, a description which brings out the contextual nature of his methodology. Niebuhr is self-conscious about his stance as an American Protestant intellectual and seeks

to ground his work in a particular identity in such a way that there can be no doubts about the relative nature of what he says. He also embraces a type of social existentialism that places the self in its relational context. His work thus has some level of affinity for Gutierrez, who argues for the hermeneutical privilege of the poor, and for Cone, who grounds his theology in black history, culture, and experience. But while Niebuhr is convinced of the sociology of knowledge and wants to limit his epistemological assumptions, he still works out of a position of privilege and never argues for any kind of epistemological break. He also never achieves the kind of concretized language characteristic of liberation theologies, so that to talk about the "Black Christ" would be a violation of his understanding of theocentric relativism: one should never absolutize the relative. And his social existentialism, while more relational than the hyper-individualistic thought common to Western theology, still places primary emphasis on the self as distinct from relational companions..

Niebuhr argues that before we ask the ethical question "What should I do?" the Christian should first ask the social question "What is going on?" and the theological question "What is God doing?" The importance of social analysis for Niebuhr's work is obvious and need not be restated here. Gutierrez has made use of Marxian methods in

his analysis of social class in Latin America, and Cone has outlined a critique of white religion and society in the United States; Niebuhr makes similar interpretations in The Social Sources of Denominationalism and The Church against the World. All of Niebuhr's writings reflect an awareness that social and ideological criticism functions as an indispensable prolegomenon to theological and ethical reflection.

Niebuhr's understanding of radical monotheism as a description of transcendent reality leads him to argue for a God who is sovereign over and active in every dimension of human life--nature and spirit, life and eternity. Like many liberation theologians, Niebuhr thus collapses the traditional distinction between history and eschatology into a continuous process of divine activity. But his passion for achieving a monistic worldview leads him to assert that even in apparently evil circumstances God is acting for our benefit, that "Whatever is, is good." Cone argues that God has seen the struggle of the oppressed and has entered the conflictual nature of history by identifying with the oppressed in their struggle. The question of theodicy is thus one of the greatest divergences between Niebuhr and the liberation theologians, who maintain that there is evil in the world with which God must actively contend.

What is faith for Niebuhr? What is "culture" (both in Christ and Culture and according to his other writings)? Must culture have a religious dimension? How does he understand the diversity of forms in which Christianity has been manifest?

The titles of his books are ample testimony to Niebuhr's concern for faith and culture and their interrelationship: The Social Sources of Denominationalism, The Church against the World, The Kingdom of God in America, Christ and Culture, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, Faith on Earth. While Christ and Culture has become a classic statement of the problem, it is also something of a case study of Christianity as part of a broader question: How do religious and cultural authorities relate to human identity? Niebuhr argues that for Christians, Christianity has moved between the poles of Christ and culture. He defines Christ as both the Jesus Christ who is part of Christians' collective history (mediated through the New Testament and the church) and as a living presence among them today. Christ plays a mediating role between the absoluteness of God and the relative existence of humans. Niebuhr employs a social scientific definition of culture as "the total process and result of human activity" (after Bronislaw Malinowski) while adding his own key themes: culture as social phenomenon, human achievement, oriented toward values, and pluralistic. Niebuhr also emphasizes that any description of either Christ or culture is a partial

interpretation at best; we can never expect total agreement among Christians concerning the meaning of the terms, much less their proper relationship.

Considering the rest of Niebuhr's writings in the light of Christ and Culture, I find him addressing the problem of faith and culture in two different ways, what I have called the sociological problem and the theological problem. The sociological problem for Niebuhr is that the two authorities--religion and culture--overlap in such a way and to such an extent that it is impossible to talk about one without talking about the other. Simply put, religion is cultural and culture is religious. In The Social Sources of Denominationalism we see him addressing the fact that, despite all their theological pretexts for division, the denominations have grown because of the influence of social factors normally considered to be "outside" the church: class, race, language, etc. He finds this "surrender" to the world to represent the ethical failure of the church, a failure that is compounded by hypocrisy insofar as the surrender is unacknowledged. Near the end of his career, in Faith on Earth we see Niebuhr addressing the religious nature of culture. He broadens his use of the term "faith" to allow him to study the phenomenology of belief, trust, and loyalty as expressed in Western culture. He argues that there is no escape from the life of faith, that we are all involved in actions of trust which bind us to our social

companions. Thus the sociological problem: religion is cultural and culture is religious, and the two authorities are inseparable.

Niebuhr hints at the theological problem in the last chapter of The Social Sources of Denominationalism, and it remains in the background throughout his career until it finds expression in Radical Monotheism and Western Culture. In The Social Sources of Denominationalism Niebuhr suggests that Western culture stands condemned by its lack of a unified religious tradition. In Radical Monotheism and Western Culture he repeats his Faith on Earth argument that faith is a general category of human existence, and then goes on to combine this assertion with the conviction of radical monotheistic faith he carries with him from the thirties. When we look at Western culture, says Niebuhr, we see a variety of forms of misdirected faith: nationalism, democracy, capitalism, communism, science, and institutional religion. These and other forms of theism compete for attention with the only kind of religious belief that can provide the monistic worldview needed in Western culture, namely, radical monotheism. This monotheism must be radical in order to exclude the other forms of misdirected faith in Western culture, which desperately needs monotheistic faith in order "to integrate and to synthesize it."

Finally, Niebuhr's understanding of the theological problem of faith and culture must be understood

in light of his conversionist ethic. "The line between church and world runs through each soul, not between souls." It will never be the case that radical monotheistic faith is achieved once and for all. The gospel recognizes the need for and demands personal and social reformation as a "continuing imperative."

In what respect is Niebuhr an American theologian?

In a 1975 article entitled "The Making of an American Mind?" Claude Welch addresses the question of whether Niebuhr should be considered an American theologian. He examines Niebuhr's intellectual companions (German, British and American), the nature of the dominant themes in his writing (intercultural and catholic), and his methods and principles (responsive, tentative and inclusive), and concludes that Niebuhr was not an "American mind." While he admits that Niebuhr did not pursue a systematic or scholastic agenda and did not lay claim to objective, metaphysical knowledge about God, Welch argues that he also would not allow for any statement that might absolutize a particular (and relative) perspective--thus, no "American theology."

The response to a question like this depends largely on how the question is framed, and it seems worth pointing out that Libertus Hoedemaker and other interpreters argue that if Niebuhr is anything he certainly is an American theologian. In the prologue to The Responsible Self Niebuhr describes his own identity as one he experienced largely through no choice of his own; employing an existentialism perspective, he describes himself as "thrown into existence" as an American Protestant. For Niebuhr the life of faith means both reflection and action as a religious and cultural self in the company of other selves. I see at least eight

reasons to argue that as theologian and churchman (for him, the two roles were inseparable) Niebuhr was preeminently American:

(1) Through his early work in the Evangelical Synod Niebuhr established himself as an aggressive reformer. He pushed the denomination to use English in its schools at a time when nearly all the instruction was in German.

(2) Niebuhr's first two major works, The Social Sources of Denominationalism and The Kingdom of God in America, also clearly demonstrated his commitment to an American Christian identity. (3) This commitment to the American church did not fade even as his interests became more broadly theological; Niebuhr suspended work on several major projects to direct a study of theological education in the United States and Canada during the 1950s.

(4) A survey of Niebuhr's published articles and addresses also indicates his strong interest in the key issues facing American church and society. He wrote on World War I, socialism, the labor movement, the Great Depression, the Manchurian crisis, World War II, the Cold War, ecumenism, the religious revival, and McCarthyism.

(5) Furthermore, except for two encyclopedia articles published in Germany in 1959, all of Niebuhr's writings were in English (his second language).

(6) Niebuhr was sympathetic to Jonathan Edwards and the Puritan tradition to an extent that few other

theologians have been, certainly more so than nearly all European theologians. It was in Edwards that he found the conviction of radical monotheism that he considered to be lacking in much of modern European theology. (7) It is also important to note that though most of Niebuhr's interpreters place him between liberalism and neoorthodoxy as a mediating figure in dialogue with Ernst Troeltsch and Barth (both German), Niebuhr described his own theological agenda as the search for a synthesis of the Evangelical and Social Gospel traditions (both American).

(8) Lastly, Niebuhr considered good theology to be confessional and good ethics to be responsible. As someone who spent his life responding to the American context and confessing the faith that guided his response, I suggest that Niebuhr's own position implies that he was indeed an American theologian.

Provide a rationale for why you made the choices that you did both in regard to balance and in relation to the use of Niebuhr for your own continuing research.

It seems appropriate to reach back four years to my first introduction to systematic theology in establishing the rationale for my selection of questions. I agree with Peter Hodgson and Robert King, with George Cummings, and with many others in suggesting that the two critical issues facing Christian theology today are the crisis of cognitive claims and the crisis of the counter-experience of massive global suffering. I have found in Niebuhr a mid-century Protestant thinker who made it his life work to combine critical reflection with responsible action in a comprehensive yet contextual manner. As Niebuhr points out, the very distinction between the sacred and the secular in Western culture is a reflection of the degree to which it has lost a radical monotheistic faith. Niebuhr's concern for questions of epistemology, phenomenology, relativity, and methodology in general seem to me to be the key fronts on which Christian theologians must wage the battle, not to convert the world, but to convert Christians to a more realistic and less imperialistic understanding of their own religious identity.