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CHRIST AND CONVERSION: H. RICHARD NIEBUHR'S THOUGHT BETWEEN 1933 AND 1937

HELMUT Richard Niebuhr is generally regarded as one of the most influential contemporary Protestant theologian in America. Partly because he wrote relatively little and partly because he shunned publicity, he did not succeed in attaining the stature of people like Karl Barth, Rudolph Bultmann, Emil Brunner in Europe and his brother, Reinhold Niebuhr, in America. Nevertheless, in his published writings and, especially, in his lectures at Yale Divinity School, where he taught from 1931 until his death in 1962, he showed that he could criticize in a strong yet pertinent way the thought of his contemporaries. Besides, he managed to develop original insights from which the present generation of American theologians are drawing fruitful inspiration.

One of the concepts which is central in Niebuhr's moral theology and which is gaining wide currency today is that of conversion. Protestant and Catholic moral theologians are beginning to see more and more the crucial rôle of this concept in the understanding of Christian life. Perhaps, Niebuhr may be useful for those who wish to explore the dimensions of conversion as seen in the light of Christian faith.¹ To present Niebuhr's view of conversion in a comprehensive way requires a full-scale study and this obviously falls outside the scope of the present essay.² I shall here concentrate on a more limited topic: the emergence of the concept of conversion in the

¹ Cf. Paul Ramsey, 'The Transformation of Ethics,' in *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. by Paul Ramsey (New York, 1957; Harper Torchbooks, 1965), pp. 140-172. Charles E. Curran, *A New Look at Christian Morality* (London and Sydney, 1969), p. 233.

² The present writer dealt with Niebuhr's concept of conversion in a doctoral dissertation entitled 'Conversion and Responsibility: The Evolution of H. Richard Niebuhr's View of Christian Ethics,' presented at the Katholieke Universiteit Te Leuven, June 1975.

thought of Niebuhr, I submit that this concept made its appearance for the first time in his thought sometime between 1933 and 1937. During this period he was trying to restore the pre-liberal American theological tradition to its rightful place.³ His encounter with eighteenth century theology in America, of which Jonathan Edwards is the chief exponent, helped him to understand that Christian life consists first and foremost in a process of permanent conversion.

I shall devote a substantial part of this essay to an analysis of Niebuhr's writings between 1933 and 1937 with the purpose of showing the immediate context in which the concept of conversion in Niebuhr took shape for the first time. I shall start by giving a very brief survey of the main phases of his intellectual evolution until 1932 so that the reader may follow the present discussion with less difficulty. Towards the end of this essay I shall indicate in what direction Niebuhr wanted to develop the ideas gained from his study of the American theological tradition.

1. THE EVOLUTION OF NIEBUHR'S THOUGHT

In this section I shall describe briefly the evolution of Niebuhr's thought between 1920 and 1932. Over those twelve years he kept re-thinking and reformulating his position as he came in contact with new experiences and ideas. The big change occurred in the thirties under the impact particularly of dialectical theology. In the immediately preceding decade Niebuhr was under the influence of liberalism which, as it is well known, assumed that the relationship between man and God presents no particular problem, since the highest aspirations of man, even on the natural level, coincide with the divine will. This assumption governed Niebuhr's thought until 1929 but, afterwards, it was subjected to a critical analysis.

The moral problem for the early Niebuhr was that of reconstructing the universal human community.⁴ Like the Social Gospel theologians, he realized that the greatest obstacle in the way of build-

³Niebuhr published the conclusions of his research on the history of American theology in his book, *The Kingdom of God in America* (Chicago, New York, 1937; Harper Torchbooks, 1959). Other works which tried to interpret the American theological tradition from a non-liberal perspective were: J. Haroutunian, *Piety Versus Moralism: The Passing of the New England Theology* (New York, 1932); P. Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts, 1630-1650* (Cambridge, 1933).

⁴Cf. H.R. Niebuhr, 'The Alliance Between Labor and Religion,' *Theological Magazine of the Evangelical Synod of North America*, XLIX (1921), 197-203; 'Christianity and the Social Problem,' *Theological Magazine of the Evangelical Synod of North America*, (1922), 278-91.

ing this community is individual and collective egoism. The divisions, antagonisms and conflicts in society are coming from the tendency of men to live and work not for the promotion of the universal human community but for their own individual and group interests.

Niebuhr interpreted sin as selfishness and salvation as life in community. In so far as selfishness is the root cause of divisions within society, sin has a social dimension. Salvation, cannot, therefore, concern merely the individual in isolation but man as a social being; it indicates a quality of life in which human relations are governed by mutual respect and not by exploitation of the weak by the strong.

Social divisions could be overcome, Niebuhr maintained, through repentance. In other words, society has to become aware of the disruptive influence of egoism before it can make an effective effort to realize the ideal of universal brotherhood. According to Niebuhr, the Christian community should be the first to make repentance for the divisions among men. The Church, however, can fulfil this mission properly, if it breaks once for all its alliance with the privileged classes and associates itself with the poor and the weak. In this way, the Church would show to the world that it really believes in the truth and power of the Cross.

Between 1925 and 1929 Niebuhr focused even more than before on the need of the Church to live a life of repentance and suffering, as it tries strenuously to deny its natural tendency toward self-preservation and self-interest. For Niebuhr the divisions within Christendom were a clear sign of the Christian capitulation to the mentality and faith of the world. If the Church wants to be effectively present in the world, it needs first of all to put an end to its internal divisions. It is only after the Church is unified that it can function as a powerful force in the reconstruction of society. A sincere self-examination on the part of the Church would reveal, according to Niebuhr, the adjustment of Christianity to the interests of economic, racial, national, regional and political groups.⁵

Niebuhr owed his new insight into the problem involved in the Church's relations to the world to the sociologist Max Weber and to the philosopher-theologian Ernst Troeltsch. A thorough study of Niebuhr's writings from 1925 until his death would prove the continuing influence of Troeltsch upon his thought. He came in contact with Troeltsch in a serious way during his studies at the Divinity School of Yale University between 1922 and 1924. During that

⁵ This is the thesis of Niebuhr in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York, 1929; Meridian Books, 1967).

period he studied Troeltsch very closely and wrote a doctoral dissertation on his philosophy of religion.⁶ From Troeltsch he took the concept of compromise. Troeltsch used this concept to show that every ethical ideal loses its radical character when it is put into practice. He argued that one could see this phenomenon happening throughout the history of Christianity: the movement of Christianity toward the world (represented by the Church-type) was always accompanied by an opposite movement of Christianity out of the world (represented by the sect-type). The Church-type Christianity brought about a certain weakening of the radicality of the Gospel ethic, because it recognized the relative validity of terrestrial values. The sect-type Christianity, represented originally by monasticism, tried to deny the claims of worldly values in order to be able to follow the radical demands of the Gospel. But Troeltsch observed that even in the case of sects the tendency toward compromise usually reasserted itself progressively after the third generation.⁷

Troeltsch taught Niebuhr to be more realistic in his evaluation of man's moral possibilities. Strangely enough, Niebuhr's new consciousness of the radical weakness of human nature did not shatter, at least for the time being, his faith in the Church's power to realize in practice the Gospel ideal of universal brotherhood. In fact, he insisted, first of all, that the Church should recognize (hence repentance in the sense of 'turning away from') the worldly sources of the existing divisions; secondly, that it should make a strenuous effort to realize (hence repentance in the sense of 'turning toward') the ideal of unity.

The optimistic note, a heritage of the liberal mentality, is certainly pronounced in Niebuhr in the twenties; he believed that men

⁶ H.R. Niebuhr, 'Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion', (Ph.D., Yale University, 1924; Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, Inc., 1973). In the twenties Yale Divinity School was a centre of the so-called 'Empirical Theology' of which the greatest exponent there was Douglas Clyde Macintosh. Niebuhr was indeed influenced by this theology as can be seen from his essay, 'Theology and Psychology: . . . A Sterile Union,' *The Christian Century*, XLIV (1927), 47-48. The empirical movement in the theology tried to work out a 'scientific' method for theology; it was a reaction against the *subjective* method of nineteenth century Protestant theology. Although Niebuhr in the thirties criticized empirical theology for not being radical enough in its criticism of nineteenth century theological starting-point, he could have probably taken from it his initial interest in the theocentric and objective foundation of the Christian faith.

⁷ Cf. E. Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* trans. by Olive Wyon (Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1960); also, Benjamin Reist, *Toward a Theology of Involvement: The Thought of Ernst Troeltsch* (Philadelphia, 1966).

possessed enough good will to overcome the stubborn resistance of human nature against the Gospel ideal of universal community. Nevertheless, as it has already been pointed out, Niebuhr was becoming increasingly aware of the moral limitations of man and the pervading presence of sin in the world.⁸ This awareness brought him close to the classical Protestant tradition and, therefore, to the fundamental Christian insight that man could not be justified by his works but by faith in God. But this current of thought remained marginal in the early Niebuhr, although it must have prepared the ground for the revolution which his basic theological convictions underwent in the thirties.

Dialectical theology began to exercise a strong influence on American theologians in the late twenties, that is, a decade after it had started in Switzerland and Germany. In the meantime significant differences emerged between representatives of the dialectical movement. Paul Tillich had already expressed some basic reservations concerning Barth's method; he criticized the latter for not taking into account that the divine 'No' pronounced on all human ideals is accompanied by the divine 'Yes' or the promise of salvation as an event which is active here and now, making it possible for human life to renew itself.⁹ According to Tillich, such a renewal under the influence of grace could actually take place, if modern man were to set aside the bourgeois mentality of self-sufficiency and recognize the reference of all finite reality to the Unconditioned i.e. God.¹⁰

Niebuhr at first found Tillich's position more congenial,¹¹ because it offered him the possibility of understanding the positive relation of faith to social life, a problem with which he was deeply concern-

⁸ Cf. H.R. Niebuhr, 'Back to Benedict?', *The Christian Century* XLII (1926), 860-1; 'Jesus Christ, Intercessor', *The International Journal of Religious Education*, 111 (1927), 6-8, p. 7.

⁹ Cf. Paul Tillich, 'Critical and Positive Paradox', in James Robinson, ed., *The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology* (Richmond, Virginia, 1968), 133-141. This essay was originally published in *Theologische Blätter*, 11 (1923), 263-9.

¹⁰ Cf. P. Tillich, *The Religious Situation*, trans. by H.R. Niebuhr (New York, 1932); originally published as *Die religiöse Lage der Gegenwart* (1926).

¹¹ Cf. H.R. Niebuhr, 'Can German and American Christians Understand Each Other?', *The Christian Century*, XLVII (1930), 914-16; 'Religious Realism and the Twentieth Century', *Religious Realism*, ed. by D.C. Macintosh (New York, 1931), 413-28, pp. 414-9, 421; P. Tillich, *The Religious Situation*, trans. by H.R. Niebuhr (Meridian Books; Cleveland and New York, 1967), pp. 9-24.

ed from the very beginning of his theological career. Experience and study led Niebuhr to become more sceptical about the moral possibilities of man and to appropriate the meaning of faith in the active presence of God in the world. Such faith has social implications, since it is faith in a God who is judging and redeeming man in all his dimensions. A crisis like the economic depression or the invasion of China by Japan is a call by God to repentance, that is, to a rigorous self-examination especially on the social level. Such national and international crises, when interpreted in the light of faith in the judging activity of God, should lead each nation and each society to see how much their lack of responsibility in the past has contributed to the present state of affairs.¹² Niebuhr in 1932 went even so far as to deny that it is part of the Christian strategy to use force to defend China against Japan, because he feared that such an intervention on the part of America would be somehow motivated by self-interest. Hence, the proper stance of the Christian in times of crisis is: (i) faith in the judging and redeeming activity of God in nature and in history; (ii) repentance or internal reformation; (iii) hope in the incoahative presence of the Kingdom of God in the world.

We observe that Niebuhr continued to consider repentance in the early thirties as something indispensable for the Christian. But he began to understand it in a new theological context. The conviction that God is active in nature and in history as Judge and Redeemer led him to rethink and reformulate the notion of Christian life. Repentance was still counted as a necessary element but it was now to be accompanied not by a self-conscious effort to actualize the ideal of universal brotherhood but by faith in God's grace in the world and by hope in the coming Kingdom.

Like Tillich, Niebuhr stressed that God is active in history as Redeemer and not merely as Judge. The redeeming activity of God in history is described by Niebuhr in 1932 as 'a different kind of world with lasting peace,' as 'a *revolutionary change* which will involve considerable destruction'.¹³ Such a conception of salvation

¹² Cf. H.R. Niebuhr, 'Faith, Works, and Social Salvation', *Religion in Life*, I (1932), 426-30; 'The Grace of Doing Nothing', *The Christian Century*, XLIX (1932), 378-80; H.R. Niebuhr, 'A Communication: The Only Way into the Kingdom of God', *The Christian Century*, XLIX (1932), 447 These last two articles were reprinted as 'The Grace of Doing Nothing' and 'The Only Way into the Kingdom of God, A Communication by H.R. Niebuhr,' in *The Christian Century Reader*, ed. by H.E. Fey and Margaret Frakes (New York, 1962), 216-21 and 228-231 respectively. References will be to the reprinted articles.

is very similar to Tillich's idea of *Gestalt* or structure of grace. It points to a radical change in the objective socio-historical world but it does not explain how it is connected with the life of persons in relation to God, neighbour and world. Redemption in time or grace appears to suggest to Niebuhr at this stage of his intellectual evolution the idea of a radical change or revolution that is taking place primarily outside the subject in the world in which he lives.

It seems to me that there are grounds to state that in the early thirties Niebuhr was interpreting grace as a radical change in the socio-historical sphere chiefly in the light of the Marxist model of revolution.¹⁴ But I would hesitate to associate completely Niebuhr's idea of redemption or grace with the Marxist theory of revolution. Niebuhr himself cautioned against a too easy association between the two.¹⁵ In fact, his emphasis on rigid self-analysis (repentance) is intended to 'create the conditions under which a real reconstruction of habits is possible'.¹⁶ In his view, the revolution taking place in the objective socio-historical world should be accompanied by an internal reformation in order that God's presence may manifest itself to the eyes of faith. Yet this subjective reformation is conceived to be the fruit of repentance. As I hope to show presently, Niebuhr developed his thought on grace in a radical fashion between 1933 and 1937. He began to understand and interpret grace as the reconciliation of the self with God and its environment. We can say that he moved to a more personal concept of 'revolution'. From the notion of revolution as a change occurring in the socio-historical world through the agency of God he moved to an idea of revolution as a change of mind and heart or as conversion or regeneration. Niebuhr, of course, did not abandon his conviction that God is active in nature and in history; he kept this conviction but added another, namely, that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ made it possible for man to enter into a new relationship with God, neighbour and world. The concept of Christian life as a change of mind and heart or permanent conversion was linked with Niebuhr's discovery of the meaning of Christ in the writings of eighteenth century American theologians.

¹³ Niebuhr, 'The Grace of Doing Nothing', pp. 219-220.

¹⁴ Cf. James W. Fowler, *To See the Kingdom: The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Nashville, New York, 1974), pp. 72-3. I believe that Fowler has overstated the similarity between Niebuhr's idea of the Christian revolutionary strategy and that of the Marxists. The differences between the two in my opinion are also important.

¹⁵ Cf. Niebuhr, 'The Grace of Doing Nothing', p. 220.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

In the following section I shall discuss (a) Niebuhr's portraits of Christ prior to his contact with the eighteenth century American theological tradition, (b) the Christological perspective in American theology.

2. CHRIST AND CONVERSION: NIEBUHR'S THOUGHT BETWEEN 1933 AND 1937

(a) *Antecedent Portraits of Christ*

The Christ which we find in Niebuhr's writings of the late twenties is prophet and priest. The prophetic view of Christ is dominant; it represents Christ as the interpreter of God's will to man. As priest, Christ is mediator and intercessor between man and God.¹⁷ Implied in the prophetic view is the liberal idea that Christ proclaims to men a moral ideal which coincides with the highest aspirations of mankind. As Niebuhr became more conscious of the radical moral weakness of mankind, he began to indicate, without, however, developing consistently, the notion of Christ as the priest who represents man before God and who makes intercession for sin.¹⁸

In 1930 when Niebuhr was preoccupied with the search for a theology which mediates between a transcendental (Barthian) and an immanentistic (American) theology, he suggested that the mediator might be Christ. Why?

Christians may be practically convinced that the mediator, in this case also, is Jesus Christ. In him they find the living union of theocentric and anthropocentric faith, of religion and ethics.¹⁹

Niebuhr compared the relation of religion and ethics to the relation between the two natures in Christ:

Religion and ethics seem to be related somewhat as are the two natures of Christ according to the ancient formula: they are inseparable and indivisible, but are not to be confused or identified with each other.²⁰

¹⁷ Cf. H.R. Niebuhr, 'Jesus Christ, Intercessor'.

¹⁸ 'The reconciliation of men to God is for Jesus no problem for theological speculation or psychological analysis, but a pressing practical need. He is constrained by His love for men, by His more than common awareness of the exceeding sinfulness of sin and of the peril of the soul threatened by degradation, to offer Himself in intercession for His brothers.' *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁹ Niebuhr, 'Can German and American Christians Understand Each Other?' p. 915.

²⁰ Niebuhr, 'Religion and Ethics', *The World Tomorrow*, XIII (1930), 443-6, p. 445.

Unfortunately, Niebuhr did not develop this basic insight into the doctrine of Christ as the one who can help us understand the relation between religion and ethics in any of his published writings of the early thirties. He simply tried to explain the relation between religion and ethics without any reference to Christ:

The field of ethics is time, but the condition of its effectiveness in time is its co-conscious awareness of eternity. The field of religion is eternity, but the condition of its realization of eternity is a co-consciousness of time.²¹

I believe that the only clue which we have in Niebuhr's published writings to indicate how he began to understand Christ in the early thirties is the phrase which describes Christ as 'the living union of theocentric and anthropocentric faith'. But what exactly is the meaning of this key phrase?

Niebuhr focused his attention specifically on the meaning of Christ within the new theological framework he was establishing in the early thirties in an unpublished paper entitled, 'The Social Gospel and the Mind of Christ.'²² Recently, a summary of and extensive quotations from this paper appeared in print. We know now that by 1933 Niebuhr had already repudiated the liberal notion of Christ as a moral idealist whose main concern was the preservation and realization of an anthropocentric value system. According to Niebuhr, an objective reading of the Gospel should reveal Jesus as 'a God-centered, apocalyptic revolutionary strategist'. Jesus, in fact, was able to see the activity of God in the events of his time and to interpret this divine activity in history as the judgment and salvation of the world. Far from proclaiming an automatic and painless progress toward the family of God, as the liberals maintain, Jesus directed men to respond to the manifestation of God in history first of all with fear and repentance. The God of Jesus is indeed man's deliverer but he is also the judge who brings the egoism of man to a tragic end.

So Niebuhr in the early thirties tried to give an interpretation of Jesus which was more in line with his newly acquired conviction about the sovereignty of God and the sinfulness of man. But Niebuhr's Christ of 1933 is not, I believe, exactly identical with the Christ he found in the writings of eighteenth century American theologians. The Christ of 1933 represents the incarnation of a ra-

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 445-6.

²² H.R. Niebuhr, 'The Social Gospel and the Mind of Christ', read at a meeting of the American Theological Society in New York, April 21, 1933, 23pp. For a summary and a discussion of this paper, see Fowler, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-93.

dical faith in God and a life of consistent response to God's judging and redeeming activity in nature and in socio-historical processes. Christ is, as Niebuhr noted two years earlier, 'a living union of theocentric and anthropocentric faith'. In this sense, Christ functions as a model for the Christian. As we shall see, American theology in the eighteenth century understood Christ as the one who made it possible for man to enter a new relationship with his fellows, nature and God.

(b) *The Christological Perspective in the American Theological Tradition*

One of the decisive and lasting contributions of Niebuhr is his work on the history of American theology. The results of his historical research were published in his first two major books: *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929) and *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937). The latter is particularly important for our purposes, because it shows a significant development on his earlier ideas and provides the theological context in which the author viewed the concept of conversion for the first time. This book grew out of the classes and seminars which he gave at Yale on 'The Ethical Ideal of American Christianity'.²³

The author mentioned two principal reasons for resuming the study of Christianity in America. Both are connected with his earlier book, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. In this work Niebuhr studied the problem of Church disunity with the help of sociology and assumed that another effort by Christians of good-will would suffice to solve the problem. Now he discovered that sociology could explain the social sources of Church division and was quite relevant to the institutionalized churches but it was inapplicable to the movement which expressed itself in a number of churches. In other words, a realistic view of Christianity has to look beyond the different denominations and take account of the dynamic and constructive element of the Christian faith.²⁴ Behind or alongside the picture of a static, fragmented religion Niebuhr was now able to see the picture of a dynamic, unifying faith. He found that Protestantism, in spite of its disunity, was able to play a very constructive rôle in American society; in fact, in this country one could witness 'an experiment in constructive Protestantism'.²⁵ When he resumed the study of American Christianity, he intended to discover the principles of constructive Protestantism in America.²⁶

²³ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York, 1959), p. xvii.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. ix-x.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

²⁶ This shift from the static to the dynamic element in Christianity was

Niebuhr mentioned also that his earlier solution to the problem of Church disunity no longer satisfied him. In the course of his book he made it clear that the will of man is perverted. Hence, before any appeal to the will can be made, man should know that his will is in bondage to itself and that, as long as he lives, the struggle for his liberation is never complete.

Niebuhr stated, without further elaboration, that his interest in the history of American Christianity was stimulated by other related reasons as well. What these related reasons were we cannot say exactly. But a hypothesis may be advanced on the basis of what we find in the book itself and other writings of the same period. The hypothesis is this: Niebuhr discovered especially in American theology of the eighteenth century a new way of dealing with the basic problem which confronted Christianity in his own day. I have two reasons in support of this opinion:

The first reason is based on Niebuhr's observation that it is not possible for Christians in America to ignore the religious and theological development that occurred in the eighteenth century. His discussion of this period concludes in this way:

In other lands of Christendom it may be possible to ignore the Christian revival of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and to seek the re-establishment of Christianity as it was in or before the Reformation. So the Neo-Protestants of Germany and the Anglo-Catholics of England believe. For America, however, — the land of Edwards, Whitefield, the Tennents, Backus, Hopkins, Asbury, Alexander, Woolman, Finney and all their company — such an attempt is impossible... It was no wholly new beginning, for the Christianity expressed in it was a more venerable thing than the American nation. Yet for America it was a new beginning; it was our national conversion.²⁷

The second reason is based on a remark he made in his article, 'The Attack upon the Social Gospel', written obviously with the history of American Christianity in mind.²⁸ In this article Niebuhr

suggested to Niebuhr partly by Bergson's *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (New York, 1935). Cf. Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, pp. xii, 6, n. 1, 11. Niebuhr, however, objected against Bergson's mystical and individualistic conception of religion: 'prophetism more than mysticism represents the dynamic element in Christianity, and... the molten fluid is poured into the social life rather than into individual souls'. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 125-6; Edwards, Whitefield, the Tennents, etc. were representatives of eighteenth century American theology.

²⁸ *Religion in Life*, V (1936), 176-181.

drew a comparison between the situation of his own time and that of the eighteenth century. The problem of eighteenth century Christianity, he argued, was how to deal with the mass of individuals who experienced an altogether new sense of freedom from external restraints. The problem of Christianity in the twentieth century was how to deal with emancipated societies, 'the races and classes which have made themselves laws to themselves'.²⁹ The situation in both cases was how to supply inner discipline in place of vanished external restraints. Niebuhr summed up his view on the matter in the following way:

The present situation may be compared to that which existed at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The rationalist effort to deal with the problem of emancipated individual life in terms of moral self-salvation and by means of indirect and melioristic action through education and reason failed. Then came the direct, revolutionary Evangelical approach based upon a theory of salvation in which – whatever the differences between Calvinists and Arminians – the adjustment of human ways to the way of God as revealed in Jesus Christ was demanded. The new movements in Christianity, it seems to the present writer, must not be interpreted as reactions to Evangelical individualism, but as efforts to discover in our own day the social equivalent of the Evangelical strategy.³⁰

As the meaning of the Evangelical strategy emerges in the context of the history of American theology, I shall now examine briefly Niebuhr's argument in *The Kingdom of God in America*.

Niebuhr was able to confirm the general view that the concept of the 'Kingdom of God' dominated American Protestantism but he found that different aspects of this concept were developed since the seventeenth century. The first was that of God's sovereignty, the second that of the reign of Christ and the third that of the coming Kingdom. These three aspects were developed in the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth-twentieth century respectively. Following is a brief survey of these three aspects of the notion of the Kingdom of God in American Protestantism.

The characteristic element of Protestant faith in the seventeenth century was that God was *Sovereign*.³¹ The guiding principle of early American Protestantism was faith in 'the living reality of God's present rule, not only in human spirits but also in the world

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

³¹ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, ch. 11.

of nature and of human history.'³² The corresponding conception of Christian life was obedience to God's present will. The priority of God's reality and freedom over human reason and will did not imply an external imposition on nature but only 'the presence of power and purpose behind or beyond as well as within natural events.'³³

From its primary conviction that God is sovereign American Protestantism in the seventeenth century drew three corollary principles. The first was *Christian constitutionalism* which laid down that knowledge of God's will had to come from God himself rather than from human nature. Hence, divine revelation was made the only criterion of true knowledge of God's will. This principle, however, did not mean that the Bible should be taken as the source of all ideas about God and all moral norms for the Christian. The conviction that God is absolutely sovereign in all periods of history did not permit such an interpretation. The Scriptures were normative in that they served as a criterion whereby new ideas and measures were to be tested.³⁴

The second principle was that of the *independence of the Church*. This principle implied that the gathering of the Church should take precedence over other tasks, whether these tasks be political, economic or of any other nature. Since faith in the living God had been set as the foundation of the whole of life, the building of the community which acknowledged that faith explicitly and attacked every attempt at the usurpation of the authority of God by any created power had to take first preference. Niebuhr described the notion of the Church which he found in seventeenth century American theology in this beautiful passage: 'It is the *ecclesia* which has been called out of the pluralism and the temporalism of the world to loyalty to the supreme reality and only good, on which the goodness of all finite things depends.'³⁵ The Church thus reflects the dialectic of Christianity, that is, 'retreat' from the world to express its loyalty to the supreme reality and only good and 'return' to the world to attack its false faith and promote an authentic faith in God.

The third corollary of faith in divine sovereignty was *the limitation of all human power*. The restriction of human power in all

³² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

³⁴ Niebuhr carefully distinguished between the use of scripture as 'source' of all knowledge about God and all moral norms for the Christian life and the use of scripture as 'criterion' whereby new ideas and measures are to be tested. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

spheres of life – political ecclesiastical, individual and (to a certain extent) economic – was a generally accepted means of preventing any finite power from becoming absolute. The problem of Christianity in America, however, took a different form in the following century when it became obvious that one could no longer deal with the new situation on the basis of the principle of the limitation of power.

Restriction of human power by means of external restraints became obsolete in the eighteenth century, because people gained a strong sense of freedom as a result of several factors: the rationalistic movement proclaimed the autonomy of reason and individual freedom; availability of free or cheap land made the masses in America economically independent. The dominant accent in American society then was on the freedom of the individual. It is Niebuhr's contention that Protestant thought in America during the eighteenth century was not simply a repretination of earlier ideas:

Though it was definitely continuous with the earlier movement, it faced a new society with new problems and represented a new emphasis. It arose in the new world of emancipated individuals who had become their own political masters to an uncommon degree... Not only was the situation different from that of the seventeenth century but the religious response to it was primarily in terms of the kingdom of Christ rather than in those of the sovereignty of God... The traditionally minded continued to deal with the new situation by means of restraint and the limitation of power, but 'the new lights' and 'the new schools' which made the idea of *regeneration* primary represented the constructive religious movement of the period from Great Awakening to Civil War.³⁶

The foregoing text introduces the concept of 'regeneration'. The concept of regeneration which eventually dominated Niebuhr's thought on Christian ethics needs to be distinguished from that of 'repentance'. As we have seen, repentance had been a constant and basic concept in Niebuhr from the very beginning. But the idea of regeneration or conversion emerged for the first time in the context of his research in American theology of the eighteenth century.

The basic elements of the concept of 'regeneration' are the following. In the first place, the notion is essentially connected with the idea of Christ and hence it introduces within the general theological framework the Christological perspective. In the second

³⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 99-101. Italics mine. Niebuhr discussed the eighteenth century American Protestant tradition in chapter III under the title, 'The Kingdom of Christ.'

place, the idea of regeneration is a substitute for the idea of external restraint and limitation of power. Thirdly, regeneration is the Christian counterpart of the humanist idea of freedom.

Before going further, it may be useful to mention some of the words and phrases which Niebuhr employed in the context of his discussion of eighteenth century theology to describe the idea of regeneration. Here are some examples: 'the cleansing of the inward parts'; 'the restoration to man of inner harmony'; 'the actuality of the new order of grace'; 'rebirth of the whole man'; 'revolution in the will to power'; 'redirection of the will'; 'the transfer of loyalty'; 'conversion of minds and hearts'; 'ultimate and permanent revolution'; 'the Christian enlightenment'.³⁷ This terminology indicates that regeneration or conversion here implies a reconstruction of the person or the self. Let me analyse briefly Niebuhr's own interpretation of this fundamental principle as he found it expressed in eighteenth century American Protestant theologians, particularly, in Jonathan Edwards whom he considered to be the greatest American theologian.³⁸

First of all, the new theology incorporated the earlier fundamental conviction in God's sovereignty. In Edwards it is clear, Niebuhr argued, that the human will cannot love God for His own sake, unless God Himself reveals His goodness. Thus the initiative lies with God. This revelation occurred in Jesus Christ. In this sense, Christ points beyond himself to the Father. Finally, the reconciliation which takes place in the believer is with God Himself.³⁹

The new theology took also into account the great problem of the day. The emphasis on freedom led theologians to develop a Christian theory of freedom. Unlike their contemporaries, however, they started with the Christian conviction that the will is in bondage to itself: 'They knew that the problem of human life was not the discovery of an adequate ideal nor the generation of will power whereby ideals might be realized, but rather the redirection of the will to live and the liberation of the drive in human life from the inhibitions of fear, conflict and the sense of futility.'⁴⁰ This is an eminently

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 91, 98, 99, 102, 113, 124.

³⁸ Cf. Waldo Beach and H. Richard Niebuhr, eds., *Christian Ethics: Sources of the Living Tradition* (New York, 1955), p. 380. Jonathan Edwards was a voluminous writer. Cf. Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of President Edwards*, 10 Vols. (New York, 1829). Edwards was born in Connecticut in 1703, died at Princeton in 1756, studied Locke, Newton, and the Cambridge Platonists and at Yale was a prominent leader of the Great Awakening which took place between 1725 and 1750.

³⁹ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, p. 103.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 102-3.

existential problem and its solution is found in Jesus Christ. Fear, conflict and the feeling of futility are symptoms of a negative relation of man to his creator. It is Christ who made possible our reconciliation with God: '... the nature of that event Jesus Christ with its repetition in the lives of believers is *reconciliation to Being*, to the divine reality, which man cannot but consider to be his enemy so long as he is intent upon promoting his own will and life.'⁴¹ The Kingdom of Christ, a central notion in American theology during the eighteenth century, meant fundamentally a quality of life based on the conviction that in and through Jesus Christ we are being reconciled to God and hence to our neighbours and to the world. Three main ideas are included in the general notion of the Kingdom of Christ.

The first idea is a new way of understanding the earlier emphasis on self-restraint and discipline. Now theologians tried to interpret the principle of the limitation of power in the light of the life and especially the death of Jesus Christ. Self-restraint was necessary not only because it is a form of obedience to the Sovereign Will of God but also, and especially, because the Son of God is continually being crucified as a result of the perennial tendency of the human will to assert itself. The will to power should, therefore, be checked by continuous repentance.⁴²

The second idea in the notion of the Kingdom of Christ is that of 'enlightenment.' The revelation of God in Christ illuminates the mind; it does not reject reason but gives reason a new set of presuppositions. The distinction was drawn between reason and the presuppositions which are prior to all logical processes; in this way, a radical opposition between reason and revelation was avoided. For instance, acceptance of the teaching of revelation about the bondage of the will still entitled one to argue rationally that freedom is a goal to be achieved through the persistent commitment of the will to the universal good.⁴³

In his discussion of the Kingdom of Christ in terms of 'enlightenment' Niebuhr remarked that eighteenth century American theologians adopted primarily an empirical conception of knowledge. Thus they focused on the experiential side of the knowledge of God. Yet they recognized also the objective criterion of the word of God in Scripture. 'Wesley, Edwards and their colleagues,' Niebuhr observed, 'maintained the principle of divine initiative in revelation and of the objective criterion by which all personal experience needed to be judged, while holding at the same time that the objective

⁴¹*Ibid.*, pp. 103-4. Italics mine.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁴³*Ibid.*, pp. 107-8, 118.

needed to become subjective, the historical contemporary."⁴⁴

The empirical view of knowledge also permitted American theologians during the eighteenth century to recognize the positive rôle which the emotions might play in the personal appropriation of the truth of revelation. The emotional factor in religious knowledge, of course, moved to the foreground because of the religious revivals taking place at the time. The ambiguity of the emotional response was recognized so that the authenticity of religious conversion needed to be tested on grounds other than those of the emotions. Yet it was also clear that the truth of the Gospel required the response of the whole man – the activity of the intellect and will, mind and heart – to be apprehended and expressed. According to Niebuhr, the Evangelical evaluation of the emotional factor in religious knowledge 'made effective and explicit the Protestant principle that God and faith belong together, or that a knowledge of God which is conceptual only and not axiological... a knowledge which is that of the head and not of the heart is of little importance in religion.'⁴⁵

Thirdly, the Kingdom of Christ was conceived as 'the kingdom of love'. When the Evangelicals (i.e. eighteenth century American theologians) understood the Christian ethic in terms of love, they did not define love of neighbour as the essence of Christianity after the fashion of liberalism. Love of neighbour was an element within a theological framework comprising faith in divine sovereignty and the revolutionary change from natural to supernatural affection. Edwards, for instance, admitted that there is considerable altruism and love in the world, but as long as there is no revolutionary change from natural to divine affection, natural love remains selfish, because it is committed to a part of the universe of being. Niebuhr summarized Edwards' theory of Christian love in these words:

The extension of self-love... from the narrow self to the wider self, from individual to the family, to the nation, to humanity, to life still leaves it attached to its root and so makes it exclusive at the same time that it seeks to be inclusive. How can human love be delivered from its partiality and exclusiveness and from the consequent tendency to conflict with the excluded reality or from its exploitation? ... There is only one way out of the dilemma of human love. What if men could see that the universal, the eternal, the fountain and center of all being is their true good? What if they could learn to love their neighbors not in so far as these are persons, lives, minds, but because they are creatures of God and sacred by their relation to

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

the ultimate Being who is also man's true good? That is precisely the possibility that has been opened in Jesus Christ.⁴⁶

According to this theory, revelation does not cancel human love but redirects, transforms or converts it. The evil does not lie in natural love as such but in the fact that it is a love of the finite and the partial. The revelation which we have received in Jesus Christ is that the fountain and centre of all being is good. Two conclusions were drawn from this theory.

The first conclusion was that all existence has a sacramental significance. Nature is a work of God and as such it is good. It inspires in us praise for the Creator and reverence for all creation. The second conclusion was that among God's creatures man deserves special reverence in view of God's loyalty to man as declared in the life of Jesus Christ. And love of man should be comprehensive: 'Not only good men but bad were to be loved; not only their souls but also their bodies were to be cherished; not only free men but slaves were to be liberated.'⁴⁷

Before going further, I should like to recapitulate the main points of American theology in the eighteenth century. The new strategy was proposed to meet a new challenge to Christianity: the emancipation of individuals rendered obsolete the previous principle of the limitation of power by means of external restraint. The notion of regeneration, transformation or conversion developed with the purpose of providing an inner discipline to direct man's new freedom. The idea of conversion was complex because it involved the whole of man's personality. Man is a complex being. He can easily forget his limitations and so he needs to control and analyse his motivations. Conversion implied, therefore, self-denial and repentance but it discovered a new depth in these activities, because it tried to see them in the light of the crucifixion of Christ. Man is also a rational being. Conversion meant the illumination of the mind. The mind could understand the ultimate problems of life, if it reasoned on the presuppositions of revelation. Besides, man is a loving being. Natural love should be regenerated in order to include the whole universe of being.

Niebuhr did not show how American theologians of the eighteenth century interpreted the relationship between the various levels of conversion. But he made it clear that according to them conversion is not complete in the individual until it is operative on the practical and affective level. Conversion is specious, they said, unless it issues in works of charity.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 114-5.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

Niebuhr was aware that the Christian strategy of the eighteenth century had to be developed in order to respond adequately to the new situation which arose in the second half of the nineteenth and twentieth century. He found that the dominant idea in this period was that of the coming Kingdom.⁴⁸ The first and second phase of Protestantism in America emphasized faith and love respectively, without ignoring hope; but hope became actually the leading idea in the nineteenth century with the rise of the Social Gospel. The social interpretation of sin and salvation and the application of the Gospel to social problems was definitely a significant evolution over previous ideas. It was important to extend the meaning of 'crisis' to include not only the death of the individual but also social catastrophes; it was also significant to regard salvation not exclusively in terms of the union of the individual soul with God but also in terms of the liberation of man as a social and a historical being.

According to Niebuhr, the Social Gospel was right when it drew out the social implications of the Christian faith but it should not have dissociated itself from the earlier theological context of faith in the sovereignty of God and grace in and through Christ. It became increasingly secular in outlook, losing sight of the dialectical element included in the notion of the coming Kingdom. Niebuhr summed up the final outcome of the liberal movement in American theology – of which the Social Gospel formed an important part – very forcefully in these words: 'A God without wrath brought men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.'⁴⁹

Yet Niebuhr showed a measure of sympathy with the failure of the Social Gospel to maintain continuity with the earlier theological views. The previous theology was based on the presupposition that the human unit is the individual and so it could not deal effectively with social crisis:

Yet the evangelical doctrine of the kingdom was not adequate for the new situation in which these men found themselves. It could not emancipate itself from the conviction – more true in its time than in ours – that the human unit is the individual. It was unable therefore to deal with social crisis, with national disease and the misery of human groups. It continued to think of crisis in terms of death while it had begun to think of promise in social terms . . . So reaction against the evangelical

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. IV.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

doctrine of the kingdom needed to arise among its own children.⁵⁰

It is thus clear that the Social Gospel could not simply take over the previous theological ideas and principles. It should have reworked them in a way that corresponded to the demands of the new situation.

How did the study of the history of American Christianity affect Niebuhr's thought on Christian ethics? I shall try to give an answer to this question in the following section.

3. CONVERSION AND NIEBUHR'S NEW TASK

The main theological principles implicit in the history of American theology, as Niebuhr saw it, can be presented schematically as follows:

- I. FAITH: The Sovereignty of God: God's *present rule* in man, nature and history.
Corollary principles:
 - 17th. (i) Christian constitutionalism.
 - century. (ii) The independence of the Church.
 - (iii) The limitation of power.
- II. CHARITY: The Reign of Christ: God's revelation in Christ *re-generating* man.
 - 18th. The principle of conversion replaces that of the li-
 - century. mitation of power.
 - The Evangelical Strategy implies:
 - (i) The use of the principle of restraint in the light of the crucifixion of Christ: so accompanied by repentance, humility and sincerity.
 - (ii) The illumination of the mind.
 - (iii) The redirection of the will.
- III. HOPE: The Coming Kingdom: Sin and Salvation concern man as a *socio-historical* being.
 - 19th.
 - 20th. The detachment of American theology from its earlier
 - century. theological background.

Niebuhr maintained that the foregoing theological principles were an explicitation of a master idea, namely, that of the Kingdom of God. Besides, he held that faith, charity and hope were present in both the seventeenth and eighteenth century theology, even though faith was dominant in the former and charity in the latter. The dissociation came in the third period where hope became central but

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

isolated from faith in the sovereignty of God and the grace of Jesus Christ. The critical evaluation which Niebuhr made of the American theological tradition in *The Kingdom of God in America* contains in my opinion the programme of his own theology after 1937. Before I specify the main points of that programme, I should like to review briefly (a) his doctrine of sin and his criticism of (b) the Social Gospel and (c) empirical theology.

(a) *Doctrine of Sin*

The essay, 'Man the Sinner', published by Niebuhr in 1935, is indicative of the author's emerging new theological position.⁵¹ His new approach is, I believe, the result largely of his encounter with eighteenth century American theology. Niebuhr affirmed the radical sinfulness of man. As we have said, he had recognized from the beginning the presence of sin in the world but it was only in the thirties that he became convinced of the inability of man to overcome his sinful condition. In the present essay he expressed basically the same idea. The Christian doctrine of sin means:

... that in our dealing with ourselves and with our neighbors, with our societies and with neighbor societies, we deal not with morally and rationally healthy beings who may be called upon to develop ideal personalities and to build ideal commonwealths, but rather with diseased beings, who can do little or nothing that is worth while until they have recovered health and who, if they persist in acting as though they were healthy, succeed only in spreading abroad the infection of their own lives.⁵²

The image which Niebuhr used in this text, and which he continued to use for the rest of his life, to describe the condition of sinful man is very instructive: the sinner is *like* a sick man. The sick man is evidently not healthy but he is on the way of regaining health. Niebuhr found this image helpful in order to distinguish clearly between the fall and creation. 'The doctrine of creation,' he wrote, 'is the presupposition of the doctrine of sin.'⁵³ Though obscured and corrupted, man's nature is perfect. 'His perfection as a creature, or his health, is not a far-off achievement, a more or less remote possibility which future generations may realize after infinite effort; it is the underlying datum of life.'⁵⁴ So the doctrines

⁵¹ H.R. Niebuhr, 'Man the Sinner,' *The Journal of Religion* XV (1935), 272-280.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 272-3.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

of sin and of the goodness of creation do not contradict one another. It seems to me that Niebuhr tried to reconcile these two points of the Christian faith by means of the theory of conversion which, as we have seen, governed the thought of American theologians in the eighteenth century. Let me try to substantiate this statement.

According to Niebuhr, sin, as a religious concept, always involves the notion of *disloyalty* to the true God. This means that when man is not loyal to God, he is not simply taking a neutral position toward God. It is the nature of man to be loyal to something; if the object of human loyalty is not God, then it is some other god like the self, the class, the nation, sex, or mankind. When man is not organizing his life around God, he is organizing it around some other centre. Disloyalty to God, therefore, means rebellion against God.

If man is by nature loyal to something, disloyalty to God implies first conflict within the individual and society – to leave the One is to be scattered among the many; secondly, death interpreted more in the ‘cultural’ and ‘spiritual’ sense – the death of cultures is the consequence of conflicting social wholes like nationalism, capitalism and communism, while the death of self is the result of internal or spiritual disintegration; thirdly, vice, like man’s inhumanity to man, cruelty to beasts, exploitation of nature, abuse of sex, commercial profanization of creation.

We recall that according to Edwards’ the fundamental problem of man was how to transfer his love from what is partial to what is inclusive of all being. Since God affirms the goodness of the whole of creation, a relationship of love with God changes one’s attitude toward neighbour and world. Sin implies a hostile relationship with God and consequently conflict of the self with others and nature. Niebuhr used the notion of loyalty⁵⁵ but his argument is identical. There is also a striking similarity in the strategy which Niebuhr and eighteenth century American theology thought Christianity should adopt to deal effectively with the fundamental problem of life. Edwards and his contemporaries saw that the times did not call for a simple reassertion of the principle of limitation of power. They did not reject this principle completely, but they used it within a new strategy, that is, the strategy of regeneration or conversion. They emphasized that Christ made it possible for man to reconcile himself with God and the rest of creation. Niebuhr affirmed

⁵⁵ Niebuhr took the notion of loyalty from the American philosopher, Josiah Royce. Royce studied this concept in his later works especially, *The Philosophy of Loyalty* (New York, 1908) and *The Problem of Christianity* (New York, 1912).

clearly the primacy of the strategy of reconciliation over that of the limitation of power: '... the Christian strategy of the restraint of evil must be wholly subordinated to the strategy of the reconciliation.'⁵⁶ The doctrine of reconciliation implies that man is unable to rescue himself out of his conflict with God, neighbour and world: 'Redemption from sin is possible only by a reconciliation to God, which cannot be initiated by the disloyal creature. Man the sinner is incapable of overcoming his sin.'⁵⁷

Niebuhr recognized also the need for the restraint of evil by means of disciplinary action:

Since man is bad, the restraint of evil – particularly of the moral evil which is the result of sin – is a necessary element in every plan for the conduct of life. 'Thou shalt nots' take their place in the moral code, self-discipline and social discipline take the place of self-expression and social freedom.⁵⁸

Niebuhr, however, insisted that those who are restraining the power of evil men should always remember that they themselves are sinners and that they are using force as a medicinal measure or as a prevention of some external consequence of sin. On this point he was, it seems, also following theologians like Edwards who tried to see the principle of the limitation of power in the light of Christ's death for the sin of all men – the just and the unjust.

(b) *Criticism of the Social Gospel*

Niebuhr's article, 'The Attack upon the Social Gospel,' published in 1936, shows clearly that he came under the influence especially of eighteenth century American theology. Let us examine the main points of this article to determine exactly the extent of this influence.

The author first of all affirmed the significance of the Social Gospel's attempt to develop a social interpretation of sin and salvation. He had expressed this opinion already in the twenties. As we have seen, he had criticized the Social Gospel in *The Kingdom of God in America* only for dissociating itself from the earlier theological tradition. In the article we are considering here he indicated more precisely the corrections required in the theology of the Social Gospel.

In his opinion, the Social Gospel should attack the social situation by means of a direct strategy, that is, 'not via governments

⁵⁶ Niebuhr, 'Man the Sinner,' p. 280.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

and economic units, but via the Church or the word of God.'⁵⁹ The reason is that social injustice and misery are fundamentally rooted in a false faith. Capitalism and nationalism are the source of the present social evil because they place their confidence in a this-worldly security. Consequently, no radically new life in society can be expected, unless the falsity of capitalist and nationalist faith is exposed and attacked. 'But an attack upon faith,' Niebuhr argued, 'requires the direct action of the Church'.⁶⁰

This notion of the Church as the community of faith or as the locus where the Word of God is heard and proclaimed started to emerge in Niebuhr's thought in the early thirties⁶¹ and become somewhat evident in a book which Niebuhr published jointly with Wilhelm Pauck and Francis Miller in 1935.⁶² It carries two contributions from Niebuhr of which one is entitled, 'Toward the Independence of the Church.' In this essay the author called upon the Church to reject its false loyalties: its loyalties to capitalism, nationalism and anthropocentric civilization. But the rejection of false loyalties is made in order that the Church may be able to commit itself to God wholeheartedly. 'The Church's declaration of independence can begin only with the self-evident truth that it and all life are dependent upon God, that loyalty to him is the condition of life and that to him belong the kingdom and the power and the glory.'⁶³

We recall that Niebuhr discovered the principle of the independence of the Church in American theology of the seventeenth century. He interpreted this principle as a corollary to the then fundamental conviction in the sovereignty of God. The similarity between such a view of the Church and that which he expressed two years previously is striking. How far was Niebuhr dependent on the American theological tradition with respect to his ecclesiology? That is a question which is very difficult to answer. As I have pointed out earlier, Niebuhr had been concentrating on the Church from the beginning, even though his understanding of the Church

⁵⁹ Niebuhr, 'The Attack upon the Social Gospel,' p. 180.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ In 1932 Niebuhr described the Christian community in terms the 'cells of those within each nation who, divorcing themselves from the program of nationalism and of captialism, unite in a higher loyalty which transcends national and class lines of division and prepare for the future.' Niebuhr, 'The Grace of Doing Nothing,' p. 220.

⁶² Cf. H.R. Niebuhr, W. Pauck and F.P. Miller, *The Church Against the World* (Chicago, 1935). 'The Question of the Church,' 1-13; 'Toward the Independence of the Church,' 123-56.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 149-50.

and its mission varied with differences in theological perspective. Besides, I have the impression, although I am not in a position to document it exactly, that he might have been influenced by the Barth of the *Church Dogmatics*. If there had been no such influence, there was certainly a close affinity between them.⁶⁴ It may also be the case that he owed his ecclesiology directly to American theology of the seventeenth century. But again there is no evidence to prove or disprove that hypothesis.

According to Niebuhr, the strategy of the Social Gospel should also be based on 'the priority of God – not as a human ideal, or the object of worship, but as the moving force in history – who alone brings in His Kingdom and to whose ways the party of the Kingdom of God must adjust itself.'⁶⁵ This theological conviction had dominated American theology in the seventeenth century. Niebuhr had already expressed it in the early thirties and so we should not presume that he took it from seventeenth century American theologians.

I could find only one instance in the essay under consideration where it is evident that Niebuhr was trying to develop his own theology in the direction of eighteenth century American theology. In fact, at one stage he argued that the strategy of the Social Gospel should be 'a revolutionary strategy, which regards the death of the old life as inevitable and as necessary before a new beginning can be made.'⁶⁶ Unfortunately, he did not specify what he meant by this revolutionary strategy perhaps because he was aware that such a strategy was still in its preparatory phase at the time he was writing. Nevertheless, he indicated the direction of his thought when he compared the situation of his day with that of the eighteenth century and said that efforts were being made 'to discover in our own day the social equivalent of the Evangelical strategy.'⁶⁷ As we have said, the Evangelical strategy implied a regeneration or conversion of the whole man. So the social equivalent of the

⁶⁴ Niebuhr acknowledged his debt to Karl Barth for his own insights into the historical evolution of American theology. Cf. Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, p. xii. Unfortunately he did not mention whether he was referring to the Barth of *Epistle to the Romans* or the Barth of *Church Dogmatics*. Anyway it should be assumed that Niebuhr noticed the positive and constructive step which Barth made in the early thirties as soon as volume one of the first part of *Church Dogmatics* was published. For a study of Barth's ecclesiology see, Colm O'Grady, *The Church in the Theology of Karl Barth*, Vol. 1 (London, 1970).

⁶⁵ Niebuhr, 'The Attack upon the Social Gospel', p. 181.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Evangelical strategy would mean the development of the principle of conversion in the light of a social theory of man.

(c) *Criticism of Empirical Theology*

In the year in which *The Kingdom of God in America* was published Niebuhr wrote a very important essay, 'Value-Theory and Theology,' on the limitations of empirical theology.⁶⁸ Empirical theology represented a major current in American religious thought in the twenties and thirties. Niebuhr had already voiced disagreement with the empirical method in 1931 but he had done so under the influence of Tillich.⁶⁹ This time his criticism seems to have been inspired by theologians like Edwards. I am not drawing this conclusion on the basis of specific references to Edwards in this essay but on the basis of the similarity between Edwards' theological method and that which Niebuhr was proposing.

In the first part of the essay the author criticized empirical theology for not carrying through its original intention. It started as a movement to restore an objective and theocentric method in theology but failed to emancipate itself completely from subjectivism and anthropocentrism. It judged the divine by means of the human, when it regarded those values to which men had been devoted always and everywhere as the fundamental criterion of the divine will. Niebuhr argued that such a method subordinated God and his will to man and his ideals.

In the second part Niebuhr gave an outline of what he thought was an adequate theological method. Such a method should avoid the two extremes, that is, the identification of the human with the divine (liberal-empirical theology) as well as their radical separation (Barthian theology). Hence, a theology which banished value presuppositions completely, as we found in the case of Barth was as inadequate as liberal theology:

... the new tendencies which have arisen in reaction to value-theology appear to be incomplete and unsatisfactory... They make revelation their starting-point, but by dealing with it as though it were a bolt out of the blue and by refusing to relate it to the value cognitions of men, they fail to give an understanding of the process whereby revelation is received... They make ethics dependent on faith, but, failing to make use

⁶⁸ Niebuhr, 'Value-Theory and Theology,' *The Nature of Religious Experience, Essays in Honour of D. C. Macintosh*, ed. by Julius Seelye Bixler *et. al.*, (New York, 1937), 93-116.

⁶⁹ Cf. H. R. Niebuhr, 'Religious Realism and the Twentieth Century,' *Religious Realism*, ed. by Douglas Clyde Macintosh (New York, 1931), 413-28.

of the principle of value, they tend to substitute the commandment for the love of God, and so run into the danger of legalism and formalism.⁷⁰

What is the right way between the two extremes?

Niebuhr affirmed that it is possible and necessary 'to interpret religion as an affair of *valuation* without assuming that such valuation must or can be made on the basis of a previously established standard of values.'⁷¹ This is a crucial but difficult point to grasp. Niebuhr tried to explain it in this way:

The valuation of which man becomes aware in religious experience is not first of all his valuation of a being but that being's evaluation of him... Religious experience includes an evaluation on the part of man, but primarily it expresses itself in the judgment, 'This is the being which values me or judges me, by relation to which I have worth or possibility of worth.'⁷²

Niebuhr was thus trying to escape the dilemma in which his position seemingly involved him by means of a distinction between two senses of the word, 'valuation.' There is the evaluation of a being by man and there is the evaluation of a man by some being. He identified the latter with religious experience. In Christianity it is God who values man. For the Christian religious experience means one's experience of being judged and loved by God. According to Niebuhr, such a value-experience is primitive and original: 'It deals with that absolute source of all value by relation to which all other things have their value.'⁷³ What is the consequence of this religious experience for ethics?

The experience of the ground and source of all value leads to the *criticism and reconstruction* of the ethical system rather than to the support of one which has been accepted as absolute prior to the experience. In this case as in others the statement that all other things shall be added to those who seek first the kingdom of God is profoundly true.⁷⁴

Implicit in the theory he was propounding was the fundamental principle of conversion. Although he made no explicit reference to eighteenth century American theology, he was certainly aware that

⁷⁰ Niebuhr, 'Value-Theory and Theology,' pp. 110-111.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111. Italics in the original.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-6. Italics mine.

the concept of conversion played a central rôle in this theology. He referred, however, to Augustine in order to explain his point that the human constitution is such that man does need God: 'The situation may be stated in terms of Augustine, that God has created us toward himself and that our souls are restless until they find rest in God.'⁷⁵

The allusion to Augustine is significant, because it shows that Niebuhr in 1937 knew that the basic insight developed by theologians in America during the eighteenth century was in line with an older tradition in the Church. One of his major concerns after 1937 was precisely to define more clearly the theological tradition which made use of the principle of conversion.⁷⁶ He also tried to elaborate a theology based on the concept of conversion and a social theory of man. It is not the task of this essay to substantiate this latter point. We can only state somewhat more specifically the kind of programme Niebuhr was proposing for his work on Christian ethics after 1937.

I. The central idea in that programme is that of conversion. Essentially, this term implies the transition from suspicion and fear to trust in and love of God. It is a change in one's personal relationship with God. It refers also to the consequent enlightenment of the mind.

II. Conversion implies on the theological level:

- (i) the conviction that God is the Redeemer: in and through Jesus Christ man has the possibility of beginning to trust and love God.
- (ii) the conviction that God is the Creator: in and through Jesus Christ man is able to see that the Creator does not mean to destroy but to affirm whatever is.
- (iii) the conviction that God is the present Ruler: God, as the moving force in history (the dominant notion of God in seventeenth century American theology), is exercising his present rule through the Cross of Jesus Christ.

III. Conversion implies on the ethical level:

- (i) response to God's redeeming activity: the beginning, though not the perfection, of man's trust in and love of God.
- (ii) response to God's creative activity: appreciation of the goodness of creation.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁷⁶ Cf. H.R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, 1951; Harper Torchbooks, 1956).

- (iii) response to God's ruling activity: restraint of one's own power and that of others in the light of the crucifixion of Christ.

IV. Sin and salvation concern man as a being in time and society.

V. The Christian community should try to live the life of faith in order to be strong enough to attack the false faith of the world. Niebuhr considered this element of the Christian strategy as one which needed to be particularly emphasized in the thirties, because of the Church's captivity to the false faith of the world.

In drawing up this programme I have in mind also the later evolution of Niebuhr's thought. He continued until the end to regard the relationship with God as the basic problem in human life. He also made use of the notion of enlightenment and recognized the central rôle of Christ in Christian life. Besides, he affirmed clearly the creative, governing and redeeming activity of God in history and the corresponding human response to these three modes of divine activity. I have tried to show in this essay that these fundamental ideas were substantially present especially in American theology of the eighteenth century as Niebuhr interpreted it.

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