THE CONCEPT OF THE CHURCH IN THE THEOLOGY OF H. RICHARD NIEBUHR

A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of

Southern Methodist University

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

with a

Major in Systematic Theology

by

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December 7, 1971

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The Concept of the Church in the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr

Adviser: Professor Leroy Howe

Doctor of Philosophy degree conferred May 21, 1972

Dissertation completed December 7, 1971

This essay investigates H. Richard Niebuhr's attempts to deal with the relationship between views of the church put forth by secular studies and those advanced by Christian theology. The thesis is that during his career, Niebuhr passed through four stages of understanding the relationship between external and internal views of the church, each one of which illumined a dimension of the church, but no one of which was beyond relevant criticism.

The church, for Niebuhr, was an operating context as a theologian and a central object of his concern throughtout his life. This essay presents his four resolutions of the problem in relationship to the four decades of his career and thus offers a heuristic framework for the analysis of his work as a whole.

Niebuhr's first two ways of understanding the relationship between external and internal views of the church assumed a different

object for each of the views and concentrated on the relationship of these "parts" of the "whole" church. In the twenties he spoke of the "ideal" church which remained in tension with the donominational institutions, and in the thirties, of the movement of the People of God which included within itself institutionalization. His second two ways assumed a single complex object of investigation and concentrated on different viewpoints from which this object might be regarded. In the forties he spoke of internal and external perspectives and in the fifties, of the dynamic interaction between them which he called "conversion."

An introductory chapter specifies the nature of the problem to be investigated, and Chapter I identifies the inner dynamic of Niebuhr's theology and the place of the church in his theological program. Chapters II-V examine in their historical context the four resolutions he offered. Chapter VI returns to the wider scope of Niebuhr's work and examines themes which underscore the importance of his concern with the church. Finally, a concluding chapter examines the significance of Niebuhr's concept of the church for the contemporary concern with church renewal. Niebuhr's work is found to have offered a concept of the church which demonstrates its relevance to a contemporary secular age and makes available to theologians and churchmen alike the insights of secular studies in devising a program of church renewal.

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INTRODUCTION

> There may be no more difficult problem in the whole realm of theological education than this one: how to relate "secular" studies to theological studies. Secular studies need not be godless because they are devoted to the understanding of things of this saeculum.[1]

This work is an examination of H. Richard Niebuhr's attempt to face this problem as it arose in connection with his analysis of the church. In this case, the problem may be expressed as this: what is the relationship between views of the church put forth by secular studies external to the Christian faith and internal theological studies? The thesis which we will be concerned to establish is this: During his career, Niebuhr passed through four stages of understanding the relationship between external and internal views of the church, each one of which illumined a dimension of the church, but no one of which was beyond relevant criticism. The development of this thesis will provide insight into a persistent theme in Niebuhr's theology, will offer a heuristic framework for the interpretation of Niebuhr's work as a whole, and will illumine an issue of significance in the contemporary

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[1] H. Richard Niebuhr, Daniel Day Williams, and James M. Gustafson, "What Are the Main Issues in Theological Education?" Theological Education in America, Bulletin No. 2, September, 1954, p. 10.

theological discussion. Before turning to the development of the thesis itself, however, a few words of explanation are in order.

In the first place, we will use the words "internal" and "external" in this work to represent the two ways of looking at the church which Niebuhr was concerned to relate. These terms are derived from Niebuhr's designation of the two types of history set forth in The Meaning of Revelation[2] but are extended beyond the reference to types of history. Formally, the terms indicate the perspective from which the church is viewed: the internal view posits some degree of identification with the Christian faith, and the external view indicates a posture not significantly influenced by that faith. Materially, however, the terms vary their precise meaning during Niebuhr's career. At times they refer more to the object viewed, at times, to the viewer's relationship to that object, and at times, to the context in which both viewer and object are evaluated. A major item of concern in this thesis is the indication of the various meanings which Niebuhr gave these terms as he sought to relate the two ways of viewing the church. The "internal" view, however, is to be understood as the THEOLOGICAL view for Niebuhr, since he finds theology to be inescapably confessional; but the "external" view encompasses a

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[2]H. Richard Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1941; Macmillan Paperback, 1962), pp. 59-73.

variety of particular disciplines--sociology, anthropology, history, political science, economics, etc. This means that Niebuhr's concern to relate two approaches to the church is a concern to maintain an extraordinarily rich dialogue. In our use of the term "external view of the church" we will not restrict its meaning to, e.g., sociology, but will attempt to maintain Niebuhr's openness to a variety of insights while yet identifying that common element which justifies grouping these approaches together. We will be concerned to identify this common element in order to avoid the charge of manufacturing a "catch-all" term including everything but theology (and perhaps even theologies different from our own). Thus there remains a tension in our use of the term "external view of the church": it must be sufficiently broad to encompass Niebuhr's own concerns, but sufficiently narrow to be determinate. It will be found that Niebuhr himself provided a clue to maintaining this tension when, in Church Against the World he distinguishes the facts from values and interpretations of critics outside the church.

Secondly, it is appropriate to indicate at the outset the four ways which Niebuhr used in conceiving the relationship between the external and the internal views of the church and to suggest something of their relation to each other. They are (1) ideal / real; (2) institution / movement; (3) internal / external viewpoint; and

(4) conversion. The first two stress different objects of the two views and the two latter stress different standpoints held by viewers of the same object. The first two focus more on the object, the latter, on the subject. Parallels between this typology and the one Niebuhr himself set forth in Christ and Culture are close, but not identical for the problems are different. In that work the question is how the church can understand the relationship between its two legitimate sources of authority. Here the question is how the church can understand the relationship between the findings of its interested and disinterested analysts. More about these parallels will occur in a subsequent chapter. Of importance here is the fact that each of these four ways of conceiving the relationship between two views of the church corresponds roughly to a decade of Niebuhr's work. This is not intended to be an exact historical claim so that observance of an occasional exception would falsify it. This is rather an inclusion of the dimension of time in our typology and it does claim to represent the significant emphasis in Niebuhr's thought during a given period. Our four chapters analyzing these ways will thus be also concerned to identify Niebuhr's major concerns within a decade of his work.[3]

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[3]Niebuhr himself analyzed his works by decades in his autobiographical statement, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," The Christian Century, Vol. 77, January-June, 1960, pp. 248-251.

This study began as an investigation of the relationship between sociological and theological understandings of the church using Niebuhr as a springboard into the more general discussion. This is not the way it progressed, and an account of several discoveries en route will both explain the shifts in the direction of this project and illumine the thesis to be developed.

It seemed to me when I proposed this project that theological, ecumenical, ecclesiastical and sociological factors indicated that the time is ripe for sustained reflection on the relationship between sociological and theological investigations. Theology's efforts to "demythologize," ecumenism's concerns with organizational mergers, the church's critical decline in ministerial morale, and sociology's perception of a need for a norm by which to assess the church all indicate that a marriage between the two disciplines might become a fertile union. At any rate it would alleviate some of the present confusion brought on by the presence of two distinctively different types of analyses of the church which appear to be in contradiction with each other.[4]

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[4] On the one hand the church is described as
> . . . the instrument of God's choosing for effecting His purpose of salvation . . . it is the Body of Christ of which He is the living head; . . . it is a community of forgiven sinners convened for worship, mutual aid, and indiscriminate service . . . it is universal and non-exclusive as to race and nationality and class; . . . the Church exists not for itself alone but to glorify God and to carry out the mission of the Gospel to all mankind. --Quoted in J. Robert Nelson Criterion for the Church (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 16.

I chose Niebuhr as a partner during the investigation of this problem for several reasons. In the first place, the adequate understanding of the church was one of his lifelong concerns, as the bibliography of his works clearly indicates. And within his general concern for the church, he exhibited a special concern for taking account of the insights of sociology. Secondly, Niebuhr was eminently qualified to deal insightfully with the problem. His theological roots reach into both the immanentism of the liberal tradition and the transcendentalism of the Barthian movement and thus provide him with a sympathetic approach to the various aspects of the problem. In the third place, scant attention has been given to Niebuhr's studies of the church by those who have analyzed his work, and finally, the resources which Niebuhr set forth seemed to me to provide a way for relating the

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> On the other hand, the church is depicted as engaged in . . . the paradox of social functionality and social irrelevance. On the one hand, organized religion must be functional in American society; otherwise it could not occupy within that society the place it now has. On the other hand, organized religion is irrelevant to the major social forces which are operative and determinative in American society; it does not effect them, and it relates to them in an overwhelmingly passive way. --Peter Berger, The Noise of Solemn Assemblies (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1961), p. 38.

These quotations represent two types of studies of the church, the relationship between which is by no means obvious.

insights of the two disciplines in a fashion that would do justice to the integrity of each. Whether or not Niebuhr himself fully and consistently realized the potential of his insight seemed debatable, but that the insight could be found in his work seemed beyond a reasonable doubt.

During the course of the investigation, however, I have made several discoveries which have occasioned a shift of emphasis in the shaping of the thesis. This shift does not negate the concerns and considerations with which the project was begun; it rather indicates that the pursuit of the more general problem of the relationship between disciplines may be a longer-range project than can be effectively pursued in a single work. The emphasis now lies on the work of Niebuhr, and this thesis may be understood as a study of the concept of the church in the theology of H. Richard Niebuhr.

The first discovery which indicated that such a shift might be in order was that Niebuhr's works provided both more and less material relevant to the investigation than was anticipated at the outset. I found, somewhat to my surprise, that Niebuhr provided rather little in the way of sustained, systematic relfection on the problem of the relationship between the disciplines, but that in practice, he exhibited more than one way of conceiving that relationship. In fact, during the course of his career, Niebuhr moved through at least four

distinctively different ways of conceiving this relationship, each of which is interesting in itself. And taken together, they comprise a virtual survey of the available options for dealing with the problem. This indicated that a study of Niebuhr's theology in itself would provide a most useful introduction into a discussion already in progress, even if it would not end the discussion by yielding a "right" answer.

The second discovery was that Niebuhr's ways of understanding the relationship of the two approaches to the church were set forth in the closest possible connection with his reflection on the nature of the church itself. The understanding of the church shaped and was shaped by Niebuhr's conception of the way in which different studies of the church were related to each other. It thus seemed misleading to attempt a separation of two themes so closely interwoven and still to claim to be representing the work of Niebuhr. This indicated that a presentation of his concept of the church as it emerged in dialogue with his concept of the relationship between disciplines was in order. Niebuhr's concern was for the church and any presentation claiming to analyze his work needs to take that into account. We have thus undertaken to set forth Niebuhr's four ways of conceiving the relationship between approaches to the church in conjunction with his conception of the church itself.

The third discovery was that Niebuhr was closely attuned to the "mood" of the times in and to which he wrote. A survey of his published works shows a number of them related to an understanding of the changing situation of the church and theology in the twentieth century. He was a conscious practitioner of the historical character of theology which he proclaimed so vigorously. But for the critic, this means that Niebuhr's work is misrepresented if it is set forth outside of the particular historical context in which it emerged. More particularly, it means that the shifts in Niebuhr's conception of the church and of the way of understanding the relationship of two types of studies of the church are themselves rooted in the times. Thus an exposition of Niebuhr's thought would have to take account of the particular interests and emphases which occupied his attention at the time when they emerged.

These three discoveries and their respective implications account for the outline of the major portion of this thesis. We will devote a chapter each to Niebuhr's four ways of understanding the relationship between external and internal views of the church, and within each of the chapters we will examine something of its historical context, the content of the operative notion of the church and turn then to an analysis of the way of conceiving the relationship between the views of the church. A fourth discovery accounts for the remainder

of our outline: the discovery of Niebuhr's emphasis on CONTEXT as critical to understanding. For Niebuhr, understanding involves viewing phenomena not in isolation but in relationship to the context from which they derive meaning and value. In order to honor that emphasis--as well as to understand Niebuhr's work--we have included chapters at the beginning and end of the thesis setting forth the theological context in terms of themes that seemed to dominate his thinking during the period under consideration. They are the sovereignty of God and faith within culture.

Three other discoveries account for the emphases that occur within this outline. First, the majority of Niebuhr's essays are relatively inaccessible, available only in the form of essays scattered through various journals over a span of forty years. The collection of published and hitherto unpublished writings, promised at least since 1964,[5] has still not appeared. This means that the writer cannot presuppose either a familiarity with the relevant primary source material or the availability of that material to someone desiring

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[5] "Projected for future publication is a collection of previously published periodical articles and unpublished sermons, essays and articles." Raymond P. Morris, "A Bibliography of H. Richard Niebuhr's Writings," revised in 1964 by Raymond P. Morris and Jane E. McFarland, Faith and Ethics, The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr, ed. Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper and Row, 1957; Harper Torchbook Edition, 1964), p. 293.

to investigate a reference. This fact indicated to me the desirability of an expository emphasis in setting forth Niebuhr's position. Thus much attention is given to particular works of Niebuhr which are taken as representative of certain emphases which may also be found elsewhere.

Secondly, Niebuhr's work may be characterized as dynamic, episodic and thematic rather than as sustained, systematic and structured. Consistency is there, to be sure, in both underlying certainties and directional probes, but it is not the consistency of the systematician who lays out his structure and maintains an obedience to it. Niebuhr wrote out of a desire to indicate and to describe a reality that could never fit neatly into logical schemes, and he placed priority on fidelity to the object rather than to the scheme. This means, however, that the commentator on Niebuhr's works cannot simply find a specific position "given" but must himself specify that on which he wishes to comment. Hoedemaker has observed this situation and has chosen to focus on style and direction as best illuminative of Niebuhr's works; Kliever, on the other hand, has chosen to approach Niebuhr's works from the analysis of methodology and a doctrine which illustrates that methodology. This thesis offers another approach, a typological approach which groups large numbers of his works within a category which, admittedly, obscures some of the rich individuality of

particular works, but which emphasizes the development of a theme of major importance. What is here offered, then, is a heuristic framework within which Niebuhr's theology may be interpreted in a way that illumines one of his major concerns as well as one of ours. The claim advanced for this framework, then, is not that of complete "incorporation" of Niebuhr. The claim is rather that this way of approaching the study of Niebuhr sheds light on one of his major concerns and makes his insights available to the contemporary theological discussion of that concern.[6]

Finally has come the discovery that Niebuhr's theological "parentage" has been thoroughly analyzed.[7] The lineage of his various emphases from Augustine through Calvin, Edwards, Schleiermacher, Troeltsch and Barth has been discussed at considerable and illuminative length. Further probing in this direction seems best left to the historian of ideas. Our approach is an attempt to accept Niebuhr's invitation to stand where he stood, to look where he pointed and to attempt to see what he saw. Niebuhr was clear that

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[6] James M. Gustafson has noted that a need exists for detailed studies of particular aspects of Niebuhr's thought in "Introduction," Libertus A. Hoedemaker, The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr (Philadelphia and Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1970), p. ix. This essay is a contribution towards meeting that need.

[7] See Hans W. Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background," Faith and Ethics, op. cit., pp. 9-64; and Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 1-38.

no two can ever completely identify in their standpoint or in their perception, but that understanding rests on the attempt to hear the other's insights sympathetically. Furthermore understanding of a position that is inseparable from the internal history of another means to adopt, at least provisionally, the cause for which that other worked. Niebuhr's cause was the renewal of the church;[8] and the cause for which this study was undertaken is the same. This means that our primary interest is not simply the theology of Niebuhr with its external ancestors and descendents and internal mutations, but rather with the theology of Niebuhr as it is illuminative of the church. Niebuhr was caustic in his critique of that "vacuous theologizing" which takes for its object the ideas of other theologians "without ever raising its eyes to the realities about which these men were and are thinking, theorizing and speaking."[9] This is a critique which we intend to avoid. A question which remains in the background of this study is this: what did Niebuhr perceive about the church which accounts for the difficulty in analyzing it clearly and consistently?

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[8] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperativ The Christian Century, Vol. 77, January-June, 1960, March 2, 19 pp. 249 f.

[9] H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Gift of the Catholic Vision Theology Today, Vol. 6, 1947-1948, p. 514.

In our conclusion, we will draw together the insights that have emerged from this study relative to the theology of Niebuhr, the nature of the church and the way of understanding the relationship between external and internal views of the church.

Our thesis, then, is this: Niebuhr offers four different ways of understanding the relationship between external and internal views of the church, each one of which gave significant illumination to a dimension of the church, but no one of which was beyond relevant criticism. We will develop that thesis in three logical stages within the outline suggested above. First, we will indicate something of Niebuhr's theology as a whole and the importance of the church in that theology; secondly, we will investigate the four ways in the manner already stated, and finally we will offer a conclusion consisting of the implications of our findings for the contemporary church.

CHAPTER I

THEOLOGY OF DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY

In this chapter we propose to set the context for our investigation of Niebuhr's concept of the church first by offering a theological "profile" of Niebuhr which identifies the inner dynamic of his thought; secondly, by identifying the role of the church in his work as a theologian; and third, by indicating Niebuhr's methodological concern as he approaches the study of the church.

A. Divine Sovereignty in Niebuhr's Theology

The concept of the sovereignty of God provides the axis around which all else revolves in Niebuhr's theology.[1] To be sure there are other axial notions which organize and unify various strands of his thought--religious realism, historical relativism,

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[1] Cf. E. J. Beker, "The Sovereignty of God in the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr," Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift, XV (1960), No. 2, pp. 108-130. Kenneth Cauthen, "An Introduction to the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," Canadian Journal of Theology, X (1964), No. 1, p. 11. Libertus A. Hoedemaker, The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr (Philadelphia: The Pilgrim Press, 1970), pp. 29, 45, et passim. Hans W. Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background," Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr, ed. Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper and Row, 1957; Torchbook edition, 1965), p. 10. Hans W. Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," ibid., p. 66.

transformationism--but these concepts themselves achieve their focus only in relationship to the notion of divine sovereignty and its consequent dialectic. Niebuhr's work finds its inner dynamic in this concept.

Niebuhr himself sets forth the centrality of this conviction in his intellectual autobiography:

> The 30's were for me . . . the decisive period in the formation of basic personal convictions and in the establishment of theological formulations of those convictions. The fundamental certainty given to me then . . . was that of God's sovereignty.[2]

He lists two other convictions in subsequent paragraphs (human lostness and faith as a gift), but he associates both with that of divine sovereignty as derivative notions.

By "divine sovereignty," however, Niebuhr did NOT mean an abstract definition of God in which the attributes of deity are clarified and raised to a degree of unsurpassibility. His focus is rather on the human confrontation with that sovereignty and with God-as-He-confronts-man. He writes,

> I came to understand that unless being itself, the constitution of things, the One beyond all the many, the ground of my being and of all being, the ground of its "that-ness" and its "so-ness" was trustworthy--could be counted on by what had proceeded from it--

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[2] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," Christian Century, LXXVII (1960), p. 248.

> I had no God at all. The change was not a change of definition of God but of personal relations to my world and the ground of the world, to the givenness of life, history, myself.[3]

The One who is sovereign is

> . . . the One on whom he (man) is completely, absolutely dependent; who is Mystery behind the mystery of human existence in the fatefulness of its selfhood, of being this man among these men . . . the One from whom death proceeds as well as life, who makes demands too hard to bear, who sets us in the world where our beloved neighbors are the objects of seeming animosity, who appears as God of wrath as well as God of love.[4]

Niebuhr's indications of God are more historical and Biblical than metaphysical, but they nevertheless provide considerable clarity concerning his notion of the sovereign God.

> What is responsible for this passing, that dooms our human faith to frustration? We may call it the nature of things, we may call it fate, we may call it reality. But by whatever name we call it, this law of things, this reality, this way things are, is something with which we all must reckon. We may not be able to give a name to it, calling it only the "void" out of which everything comes and to which everything returns, though that is also a name. But it is there--the last shadowy and vague reality, the secret of existence by

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[3] Idem.

[4] H. Richard Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), pp. 36 f.

> virtue of which things come into being, are what they are, and pass away.[5]

These quotations make it abundantly clear that Niebuhr had no interest in efforts to prove God's existence or to describe His aseity.[6] His concern was with God-as-encountered-by-man and God-encountering-man. In this respect, his thought may be contrasted with that of Schubert M. Ogden. Summarily stated, Ogden assumes the reality of faith and proceeds by argument to demonstrate the reality of God.[7] Ogden does not allow that the fact of God's reality is contingent; he does, however, allow that man's recognition of this fact is indeed contingent.

Ogden finds the theological issue with respect to the concept of God to be posed by the theological situation:

> . . . whether, if the word "God" as Christians use it has any meaning at all, the sentences in which it occurs somehow express assertions capable of being true.[8]

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[5]H. Richard Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God," Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, With Supplementary Essays (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970), p. 122. Essay originally published as "The Nature and Existence of God: A Protestant's View," Motive, IV (1943), pp. 13-15, 43-46.

[6]Cf. Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," op. cit., pp. 71f., especially notes 15, 16; also Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 51ff.

[7]Cf. Schubert M. Ogden, The Reality of God and Other Essays (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 1-70.

[8]Ibid., p. 12.

The problem with which he is concerned is the problem of intelligibility. The method by which he proposes to resolve the problem is to exhibit the concept of God as "the most adequate reflective account we can give of certain experiences in which we all inescapably share."[9] And that common human experience which establishes the final irrationality of the denial of God's reality is the experience of faith, an original and inescapable trust in

> . . . the real whole of which we experience ourselves to be parts. . . . The word "God," then, provides the designation for whatever it is about this experienced whole that calls forth and justifies our original and inescapable trust. . . .[10]

> . . . faith in God as the ground of confidence in life's ultimate meaning is the necessary condition of our existence as selves.[11]

Niebuhr, on the other hand, assumes the reality of God and proceeds by analysis and argument to demonstrate the desirability of faith. The real point of difference between the two has less to do with their respective conceptions of God--Ogden's is far more objectified, but perhaps not incompatible with Niebuhr's--than with their conceptions

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[9] Ibid., p. 20.

[10] Ibid., p. 37.

[11] Ibid., p. 43.

of faith. For Niebuhr, faith is man's chief problem,[12] and when it comes, it comes as a miraculous gift.[13] For Ogden, faith is given to man simply with his humanness although self-conscious appropriation of one's faith may be lacking. But for Niebuhr, faith in God is man's problem precisely because of his frequent and well-known confrontations with mysterious power which is not amenable to his control.[14] Thus Niebuhr writes about human faith in its structure and different modes,[15] but he does so precisely because of his presupposition of the reality and sovereignty of God. The BASIC difference between the two notions of faith is their respective concepts concerning its relation to its only appropriate object. Both Ogden and Niebuhr agree that every person has faith and that there are adequate and

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[12]Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, op. cit., p. 36.

[13]Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," loc. cit., p. 249.

[14]Cf. Hoedemaker, op. cit., p. 52.

[15]Cf. the following articles by Niebuhr: "The Triad of Faith," Andover Newton Bulletin, XLVII (1954), 3-12; "On the Nature of Faith," Religious Experience and Truth: A Symposium, ed. Sidney Hook (New York: New York University Press, 1961), pp. 93-102; "Faith, Works and Social Salvation," Religion in Life, I (1932), pp. 426-430; "Reflections on Faith, Hope and Love," (unpublished paper, n.d.); Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, op. cit.; etc.

deficient forms of faith.[16] For Ogden, however, the inadequate form of faith, idolatry, always INCLUDES faith in God; for Niebuhr, idolatry is faith in an object or objects OTHER THAN God resulting from a basic fear and distrust of the ultimate power, the reality of which no one seriously questions. The sovereignty of God is discussed by Niebuhr as a problem of faith, and by Ogden, as a problem of understanding.

But it is also inaccurate to suppose that Niebuhr's concern was with man's faith rather than with the object of that faith. He consistently declared that God and faith go together, and his theology is as little reducible to the latter as to the former.

In his otherwise excellent exposition of Niebuhr's theology, Hoedemaker interprets Niebuhr's concern for divine sovereignty or radical monotheism as basically a concern about man's faith:

> The center of gravity in this theology, the end of the human road, is not God or Christ or the good, but a transformation of things and relations. The question of whether there is faith in God is more significant than the question of whether God exists, not because faith directs its attention towards itself rather than to God, but because the rediscovery of the sovereign God and the redirection of faith toward the source of being is

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[16] Schubert M. Ogden, op. cit., pp. 23f.; H. Richard Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, op. cit., pp. 41f.

> the road toward the healing of the ills of our world.[17]

But Niebuhr was concerned with considerably more than a utilitarian faith directed towards its rightful object in order that other ends might be achieved.[18] In fact he consistently rejected such a procedure as a distortion of Christianity, a substitution of some value-center other than God. And that center of value is bound, at some time or another, to find the idea of God dysfunctional or at least unnecessary to its own actualization. At this point is exposed the real center of value, the cause and object of trust. In Hoedemaker's thought, human redemption, "the total renewal of things and relations" is the final goal to be sought, and that redemption "would include redemption from the necessity to have a god, and thus would include God's final disappearance."[19]

According to Niebuhr, however,

> Christian faith calls for a complete change of mind, not because repentence is socially effective, or

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[17] Hoedemaker, op. cit., p. 80; cf. argument, pp. 16, 171, n. 66.

[18] Cf. H. Richard Niebuhr, "Utilitarian Christianity," Christianity and Crisis, VI (1946), pp. 3-5; "Value Theory and Theology," The Nature of Religious Experience: Essays in Honor of Douglas Clyde Mackintosh, ed. com.: J.S. Bixler, R.L. Calhoun, H. Richard Niebuhr (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1937), pp. 93-116; Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, op. cit.

[19] Hoedemaker, op. cit., p. 165.

> individually effective for that matter, but because the mind is out of harmony with reality. Repentance is called for not because we shall suffer or because civilization will perish if we do not repent, but because others are now perishing for us and because we are attacking the very son of God or God himself in our endeavor to escape suffering and to maintain our civilization at any cost.[20]

Christian faith--radical monotheism--may and does have social consequences, but to adopt it for the sake of desired consequences is to miss it altogether. God, not man, is the only proper center of values for the radical monotheist.

Thus Niebuhr's conviction of divine sovereignty reflects a passion for neither metaphysics nor faith in isolation from each other. God, and not ideas or attitudes concerning God, is sovereign, and man's problem is how to love and trust this sovereign One.[21]

Hoedemaker's rightful concern is to prevent passive acquiescence to the status quo which results from a static image of the divine sovereignty.[22] Yet Niebuhr himself avoids the paralysis and provides ample room within his notion of divine sovereignty for responsible

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[20]Niebuhr, "Utilitarian Christianity," loc. cit., p. 4.

[21]Cf. Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, op. cit., p. 36.

[22]Cf. Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 153 ff., esp. p. 158.

moral action.[23]

Divine sovereignty, then, in Niebuhr's view, is both fact and attitude; man knows himself to be over against that which is quite beyond his power to manipulate, and this raises the question of the relationship he will take towards that One. In faith, THAT One is center of all value and trust and loyalty. For Niebuhr, the end of the human road is not civilization or humanity or Christ or church or life itself, but GOD, the power of being.

But divine sovereignty and its subjective counterpart, radical monotheism, were not isolated notions for Niebuhr. Certain implications followed from them which provided the inner dynamic of Niebuhr's work as a whole. We do not suggest that in all his writings Niebuhr referred explicitly to the sovereignty of God; rather, that the WAY in

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[23] In an article referring to the Sino-Japanese conflict ("The Grace of Doing Nothing," Christian Century, XLIX (1932), pp. 378-380), H. Richard Niebuhr once advocated a policy of non-interference because in the crisis of God's judgment, there seemed to be nothing effective one could do. His brother Reinhold countered with a suggestion that inaction on these grounds seemed to presuppose an untenable idealism (cf. "Must We Do Nothing," ibid., pp. 415-417). But H. Richard Niebuhr replied that he had never intended to say that man could do nothing in history; rather he presupposed the genuine possibility of doing good (cf. "The Only Way Into the Kingdom of God," ibid., p. 447). But even in Richard's original article, there was nothing of the passivity Hoedemaker suggests: ". . . today radical Christianity knows that nothing constructive can be done by interference but that something very constructive can be done in preparation for the future." "The Grace of Doing Nothing," loc. cit., p. 379.

which he examined whatever he examined presupposed that sovereignty. We turn now to examine those implications.

The centering of one's values, loyalty and trust on God--the faith of radical monotheism--has a dual implication:

> Radical monotheism dethrones all absolutes short of the principle of being itself. At the same time it reverences every relative existent. Its two great mottoes are: "I am the Lord thy God; thou shalt have no other gods before me" and "Whatever is, is good."[24]

This movement between the dethronement of every idol and the reverence of every reality is the inner dynamic of Niebuhr's work. Religious realism, historical relativism, conversionism, confessionalism, and moral responsibility all take their peculiar shape in Niebuhr's thought from his utter rejection of any claims to ultimacy on the part of finite reality and his utter determination to honor every penultimate reality with the significance it deserves simply by virtue of its being.

This dynamic in Niebuhr's thought is genuinely dialectic in character, and any reduction of this character both obscures some of the richness of his thought and leads into some of the perversions he was concerned to avoid. One begins with finite reality; then one realizes the divine sovereignty which negates the claims of this reality for ultimate significance, but which restores a dimension of penultimate

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[24]Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, op. cit., p. 37.

significance onto this reality as ruled by God; yet this significance does not reside primarily in the finite reality in itself--although it has significance in se--but also in its transparency to that ultimate source and end by virtue of which all things have significance. Any attempt to reduce this dialectic by negating one of its stages results in either a Manichean dualism which negates the significance of the finite OR a secularism which grants significance to the finite without reference to its infinite source and end, the sovereign God.

Niebuhr's portrayal of the church in all its dimensions reflects this dynamic: neither institution nor movement nor community rightly claimed an ultimate loyalty from men. Yet neither were they worthy of contempt, and they were all capable of pointing beyond themselves to the sovereign God.

The major emphases in Niebuhr's theology exhibit this dialectic of divine sovereignty. In each case the inner dynamic is provided by the two great mottoes, namely, "Thou shalt have no other Gods before me" and "Whatever is, is good." To illustrate this contention as well as to provide a profile of Niebuhr's theology, we will now examine four of his persisting concerns: religious realism, historical relativism, christology, and moral responsibility. In each case we will briefly indicate the content of the concern and then show its expression of the dialectic of divine sovereignty.

1. Religious Realism

One theme which persists throughout many of Niebuhr's writings is a critical concentration on the object rather than the subject of experience. In the realm of theology, Niebuhr refers to this disposition of mind as "religious realism."[25]

As early as 1927 Niebuhr began a sustained critique against the subjectivization of theology which he attributed to 19th century liberalism. The "marriage," for example, of theology and psychology was consummated in the work of Schleiermacher,

> . . . who defined religious doctrine in terms of social consciousness and of individual experience. . . . But the union has been sterile.[26]

The problem is that

> Psychology has substituted religious experience for revelation, auto-suggestion for communion with God in prayer and mysticism, sublimation of the instincts for devotion, reflexes for the soul, and group consciousness for the ideal, wish-fulfillment for God.[27]

In this view, man quite literally becomes the measure of all things. The anthropocentrism and anthropocratic tendencies of the age crept

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[25] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Religious Realism and the Twentieth Century," Religious Realism, ed. D. C. Macintosh (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1931), p. 413.

[26] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Theology and Psychology: A Sterile Union," Christian Century, XLIV (1927), p. 47.

[27] Idem; cf. "Value Theory and Theology," op. cit., pp. 97 ff.

into religious thought bring concentration on the religious subject rather than faith's object. The ultimate end of this line of development "is modern humanism with its elimination from religion of all but human objects and purposes."[28]

Niebuhr observes that a shift towards realism has occurred in the 20th century in art, literature, science and philosophy as well as in religion.[29]

> But the movement became definitely realistic in character and found its common essence when it turned from experience to the content of experience, from emphasis upon the religious subject to attention to the religious object, from religion to God. . . . all of these movements of religious realism are united by a common interest in maintaining the independent reality of the religious objects.[30]

Barth and theologians of crisis represent the extreme dogmatic form of this objectivist movement and Tillich, a more satisfying "faith-realism."[31]

But it is the OTHER which is sought, obeyed and trusted in faith. And one does this not for enhancement of self or mankind, but

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[28] Niebuhr, "Religious Realism and the Twentieth Century," op. cit., p. 416.

[29] Ibid., pp. 417f.

[30] Ibid., p. 418.

[31] Ibid., pp. 420ff.

simply for the sake of honoring reality. As a realist, then, Niebuhr's passion is for God who is not reducible to human experience of God and who is never simply guarantor of human values.

a. This realism means, among other things, subordination of human values and undertakings to that Void or Other which composes man's ultimate environment. It involves drawing a clear and sharp line between the absolute and the finite. Man, for Niebuhr, is not the object of religion or the religious quest, although he devises immensely subtle ways of pretending that he is. Value-theology, for example, attempts to define or designate God by reference to values identifiable apart from God and then to posit God as their guarantor.[32] For the Christian God alone is sovereign, and this means that no human idea, feeling, experience or value can be elevated to a position of absoluteness.

Religious realism is a way of declaring the sovereignty of God over the religious subject--of relegating that subject to a finite status

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[32] Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," op. cit. One must understand this as an argument aimed at the practical reason. For an advocate of a similar position--such as Ogden--would reject the suggestion that he posits values such as human life APART FROM God; indeed, Ogden's point is precisely that we cannot have the values we in fact DO have without presupposing faith in God. But Niebuhr is not fundamentally interested in this issue; his concern is with what men place at the center of their values as the criterion of goodness, and for Christians, according to Niebuhr, this can only be God.

away from predominance in the realm of thought. Critical realism is a protest against the facile absorption of the absolute by the relative.

b. But realism does not imply a Manichaean dualism.

> The independence of God from experience does not imply his remoteness from experience; the relativity of historical experience does not imply the absence of an absolute content or point of reference; the presence of evil in more subtle and pervasive forms than is usually granted by American realism does not imply the absence of good.[33]

Man and his experience is not to be ignored as a means of perceiving and talking about God. Nor is value-theory to be despised.[34] For man, being finite, has no direct unequivocal recourse to the Infinite. Concentration on the religious object does not involve NEGATION of the subject but rather, mediation by the subject. The experience, values, and ideas of men are capable of TRANSPARENCY, of providing access to the divine. Indeed, God is perceived as man's activity in external history takes on internal meaning and significance. The vehicle for revelation is thus the internal or experienced history of man.[35] Thus a critical religious realism examines man's faith

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[33]Niebuhr, "Religious Realism and the Twentieth Century," op. cit., p. 428.

[34]Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," op. cit., pp. 110ff.

[35]H. Richard Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941; Macmillan Paperback edition, 1962), pp. 89-109.

and experiences (God and faith go together), but it does so from the interest in God who is not reducible to man. Focus on God, however, returns one's attention to man's experience as vehicle for expressing and for maintaining that focus. Furthermore, when theology is properly disinterested in man, then it can be of genuine service to man, for then it presents him in his rightful place in the scheme of things.[36]

2. Historical Relativism

The content of Niebuhr's concept of historical relativism is described in a later section of this thesis. In brief, it has to do with the conviction that one's perception is inescapably conditioned by his spatio-temporal standpoint.[37] Nevertheless, Niebuhr insists that the object of perception is real, even though the perception of that object is relative.

Although Niebuhr cites as the source of this theme the historical criticism of the 19th century, and the Reformation conjunction of faith and knowledge of God,[38] he nevertheless presents it in a way

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[36] Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," op. cit., p. 101.

[37] Cf. Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, op. cit., pp. 6 ff.

[38] Ibid., pp. 7 ff., esp. pp. 14, 22 ff.

that shows its compatibility with divine sovereignty.[39]

a. For in the first place, historical relativism destroys any notion of man's ability to transcend his finitude. With the self-knowledge of today, men

> . . . know that they are historical selves whose metaphysics, logic, ethics and theology, like their economics, politics and rhetoric are limited, moving and changing in time.[40]

He is now aware that not only does time and space limit and affect the OBJECT of knowledge, it also affects himself, its SUBJECT.[41]

> There does not seem to be any apparent escape from the dilemma of historical relativism for any type of theology.[42]

The human self is dethroned from its status as idol by the recognition of its inescapable finitude and of that which is knowable within man's limits but which is utterly unbounded by them.

b. But, secondly, historical relativism is an affirmation of man's authentic status.

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[39] Cf. Hoedemaker, op. cit., p. 47.

[40] Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, op. cit., p. 9.

[41] Ibid., p. 13.

[42] Ibid., p. 16; cf. Lonnie D. Kliever, "The Christology of H. Richard Niebuhr," Journal of Religion, L (1970), p. 36.

> . . . the recognition of reason's historical limitations can be for theology in particular, as for the social sciences in general, the prelude to faithful critical work in history and in historically apprehended experience.[43]

Within its established limits man's reason is effective, quite capable of knowledge of the universal, even though the categories through which this is perceived and expressed are not universal categories.[44] Furthermore this limitation itself insures the relevance to history of human knowledge.

> . . . historical relativism, acknowledging the limitation of religious reason to history can cherish the hope that work in the limited sphere may issue in better intellectual and practical organization of the historical, social life of Christianity.[45]

Thus Niebuhr's historical relativism exhibits the dialectic that issues from the conviction of divine sovereignty. For that belief demands the utter and total subservience of all that is not-God. But in affirming divine rule, it declares all that is to be created, sustained and redeemed by God and therefore of utter value.[46] Historical

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[43] Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, op. cit., p. 17. Cf. Van A. Harvey, The Historian and the Believer (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966) for an insightful elaboration of this point.

[44] Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, op. cit., pp. 18f.

[45] Ibid., p. 21.

[46] Cf. Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, op. cit., p. 37.

relativism is the implication of divine sovereignty for human reason.

3. Christology

Its implication for an understanding of Christ is a bit more complex. The content of Niebuhr's Christology has been amply discussed elsewhere[47] and a certain consensus reached, namely

> . . . for him basic Christological discussion was transferred from metaphysical to methodological or epistemological bases, from the "two natures in one person" to two ways of understanding one historical event.[48]

Critics differ somewhat in their assessment of this type of Christology, but agree that this IS the type Niebuhr espoused.

The content of that Christology is most aptly summarized by Kliever:

> . . . only radical faith's exclusive dependence upon God and inclusive love for neighbor can sustain and fulfill human existence. . . . Jesus Christ calls forth such radical dependence upon God and radical love for others by incarnating and mediating radical faith. . . . As the Christian community's definitive Neighbor, Jesus Christ must at once mediate the human

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[47] Cf. Lonnie D. Kliever, Methodology and Christology in H. Richard Niebuhr (Doctoral Dissertation, Duke University, 1963); and "The Christology of H. Richard Niebuhr," loc. cit.; Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," op. cit., pp. 104-116; Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 93-126.

[48] Frei, ibid., p. 106.

> and the divine dimension of radical faith. . . . Niebuhr's Christology explicates both the movement of Jesus toward God and every neighbor, and the movement of God toward Jesus and every neighbor. In this structure, he can speak of Jesus Christ as the mediator of both true humanity and true divinity.[49]

Given man's historical--and faith--relativism, Niebuhr observes that every perspective is rooted in a central IMAGE which serves as paradigm around which all subsequent events are interpreted. For the Christian community Jesus both serves as this paradigm and occasions the adoption of the perspective in which he is paradigmatic.[50]

Within this Christological scheme, however, one finds the dialectic of divine sovereignty very much in evidence.

a. In the first place, Niebuhr vehemently rejects what he calls "Christomonism" or "Jesusolatry."[51]

> . . . belief in Jesus Christ . . . always means belief in God. No one can know the Son without acknowledging the Father. To be related to Jesus Christ is to be related to the One to whom he undeviatingly points. As Son of God he points away from the many values of man's social life to the One who alone is good; from the many powers which men use and on which they depend

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[49] Kliever, "The Christology of H. Richard Niebuhr," loc. cit., pp. 41, 45.

[50] Cf. ibid., for a discussion of how this takes place.

[51] H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," Theology Today, III (1946), pp. 3f., 8; cf. also Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, op. cit., pp. 59f.; and The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, op. cit., pp. 44f.

> to the One who alone is powerful; from the many times and seasons of history with their hopes and fears to the One who is Lord of all times and is alone to be feared and hoped for; he points away from all that is conditional to the Unconditional.[52]

The elevation of Jesus Christ himself to a central position as object of faith leads directly to a henotheistic faith and participation in a closed community. For in fact Jesus Christ is the center of a particular historical community the significance of which lies in its transparency to that which is unlimited.[53]

Can there be faith without Jesus Christ, i.e., without encountering the particular details of his life, death and resurrection? In principle there can, although Niebuhr is reticent on this topic.

> There may be other ways, but this is the usual way for us. . . . In the presence of Jesus Christ we most often conceive, or are given that faith. We may try to understand how we might have received the faith without Jesus Christ; but the fact remains that when this faith was given, Jesus Christ was there.[54]

> I do not have the evidence which allows me to say that the miracle of faith in God is worked only by Jesus Christ and that it is never given to men outside the

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[52]H. Richard Niebuhr, Christ and Culture (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951; Harper Torchbook edition, 1956), p. 28.

[53]Cf., e.g., Gordon D. Kaufman, Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), pp. 483f. for elaboration of this point.

[54]Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God," op. cit., pp. 124f.; cf. Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, op. cit., p. 60.

> sphere of his working, though I may say that where I note its presence I posit the presence also of something like Jesus Christ.[55]

But even to ask the question is an attempt to escape from one's own historical particularity and to achieve a divine overview. One is only able to speak within his community, and within the Christian community Jesus Christ occupies a place of prominence as mediator of God.

b. The second move, already hinted at, involves affirmation of the utter significance of the penultimate reality, Jesus Christ.

Within our historico-religious community, Jesus is the decisive and definitive mediator of faith in God.[56] His virtues[57] and his death and resurrection[58] call forth in us a response of faith in God.[59] In other words, Jesus Christ is the norm of the church:[60]

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[55] Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," loc. cit., p. 149.

[56] Cf. H. Richard Niebuhr, "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," The Heritage of the Reformation: Essays Commemorating the Centennial of Eden Theological Seminary, ed. E.J.F. Arndt (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1950), p. 223.

[57] Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, op. cit., pp. 14-28.

[58] Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God," op. cit., pp. 124f.; The Meaning of Revelation, op. cit., pp. 120-128.

[59] Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, op. cit., p. 29.

[60] H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Norm of the Church," Journal of Religious Thought, IV (1946-47), p. 9.

> The church is not primarily characterized by the fact that it is a religious community whose religion centers in Jesus Christ, but simply by the fact that as a community it centers in him.[61]

For those of us in the Christian community Jesus Christ is the mediator of radical monotheism.

> The power and attraction Jesus Christ exercises over men never comes from him alone, but from him as Son of the Father. It comes from him in his Sonship in a double way, as man living to God and God living with men. Belief in him and loyalty to his cause involves men in the double movement from world to God and from God to world.[62]

He is the pioneer

> . . . not only in resurrection but in rendering obedience to God. His obedience was a sort of pioneering and representative obedience; he obeyed on behalf of men, and so showed what men could do and drew forth a divine response in turn toward all the men he represented. He discerned the divine mercy and relied upon it as representing men and pioneering for them.[63]

Jesusolatry or unitarianism of the second person must be avoided,[64] yet Jesus Christ who is limited to a particular historical

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[61] Ibid., p. 10.

[62] Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, op. cit., p. 29.

[63] H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," The Gospel, The Church and the World, ed. K.S. Latourette, Vol. II: The Interseminary Series (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1946), p. 131.

[64] H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," Theology Today, III (1946), pp. 371-384.

strain, is nonetheless the model of a right relation between man and God within this strain.

4. Moral Responsibility

In spite of the depth and breadth of his theological reflection, Niebuhr's principle arena of teaching was ETHICS, and his contributions in that field were as distinctive as those in theology. In fact the two were not separated for Niebuhr.[65] Ethics were based on faith in God and faith in God led to ethics.

The basic ethical category for Niebuhr is "responsibility." Previous images of man-the-maker oriented towards the good and man-the-citizen oriented towards the law[66] have been useful guides for interpreting moral experience, but now a new image is arising which promises greater adequacy.

> It represents an alternative or an additional way of conceiving and defining this existence of ours that is the material of our own actions. What is implicit in this idea of responsibility is the image of man-the-answerer, man engaged in dialogue, man acting in response to action upon him.[67]

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[65] Cf. Niebuhr, "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," op. cit., pp. 218ff., esp. pp. 223f.

[66] H. Richard Niebuhr, The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 48-54.

[67] Ibid., p. 56.

The category most aptly applied to responsible action is "fitting."[68] Summarily defined, responsibility is

> . . . the idea of an agent's action as response to an action upon him in accordance with his interpretation of the latter action and with his expectation of response to his response; and all of this in a continuing community of agents.[69]

Christian responsibility is responsibility to the universal God, and this renders the content of its obligation infinite.[70] Christians belong to the "divine and universal society":

> It is necessary, however, if the Church's peculiar sense of obligation is to be illuminated, to define the Being to whom it is answerable as God-in-Christ and Christ-in-God.[71]

The former stresses the Church's UNIVERSAL responsibility, for the One to whom response is due is Lord of all that is. The latter stresses the REDEMPTIVE content of responsibility, for the One to whom response is due is "the one who gave his life as ransom and whose whole activity was a seeking and saving of the lost."[72]

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[68] Ibid., p. 57.

[69] Ibid., p. 65.

[70] Niebuhr, "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," op. cit., p. 117.

[71] Idem.

[72] Ibid., p. 120.

The ethics Niebuhr advocated, then, was clearly and explicitly THEOCENTRIC ethics.[73]

a. This implied, however, that they were NOT absolutist ethics.[74]

> Christian ethics should recognize the truth of relativism by resisting the temptation of making an absolute principle, valid for all times and places, out of such insights into principle as come to it under the pressure of new conditions.[75]

There are indeed elements of the absolute seeking expression in principles, but

> All attempts to define this absolute factor will necessarily be incomplete, and all definitions will perforce be partly relative; but incomplete experience of the absolutely good is not experience of the incompletely good, nor is relatively true definition of moral reality a definition of a relatively moral reality.[76]

Niebuhr acknowledges that no code of law, no customs and no eternal principles are able to capture and hold the content of man's moral obligation. At best they are indicators of that obligation--at

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[73] Niebuhr, "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," op. cit., p. 220; cf. Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 47f.

[74] Cf. Paul Ramsey, "The Transformation of Ethics," Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 142.

[75] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic," (Preliminary paper for the Conference on Theological Education, Drew Theological Seminary, Madison, N.J., Nov. 29 - Dec. 1, 1929), (New York: International Missionary Council, 1929?), pp. 7f.

[76] Ibid., p. 10.

worst they are idols which obscure it. But they are relative to the particular religious and cultural situation in which they were formed.

b. Yet they are not for that reason less binding. While theocentric ethics is an ethics of freedom from self-seeking and from bondage to cultural values and the law,[77] it is an ethics of freedom TO

> . . . deal creatively and with the social and personal situations that confront them and to respond with inventiveness and artistry to the challenges they (men) meet. . . .[78]

Niebuhr's ethics are not those of nihilism or antinomianism. The content of Christian obligation is universal; "The Church looks not only to the absolute in the finite but to the redemptive principle in the absolute."[79] Knowledge of the inescapable particularity and relativity of given values and rules does not remove their obligatory force. In fact it increases that force for relative and particular men.

Ramsey has observed this emphasis in Niebuhr and has suggested that a term for Niebuhr's ethics more accurate than "objective relativism" is "relational objectivism";[80] Niebuhr affirms the reality of values and obligations, but observes that these are relational

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[77]Niebuhr, "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," op. cit., pp. 224 ff.

[78]Ibid., pp. 226 f.

[79]Niebuhr, "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," op. cit., pp. 118 f.

[80]Ramsey, op. cit., p. 156 f.

terms pointing to contexts or relations on which they are dependent.

Niebuhr summarizes his position and simultaneously illustrates its relation to his notion of divine sovereignty in the following paragraph from "The Center of Value":

> Its starting point, its dogmatic beginning, is with the transcendent One for whom alone there is an ultimate good and for whom, as the source and end of all things, whatever is, is good. . . . With this beginning the value-theory of monotheistic theology is enabled to proceed to the construction of many relative value systems, each of which is tentative, experimental, objective, as it considers the interaction of beings on beings, now from the point of view of man, now from the point of view of society, now from the point of view of life. But it is restrained from erecting any one of these into an absolute, or even from ordering it above the others, as when the human-centered value theory is not only compatible with such objective relativism in value analysis but requires it in view of its fundamental dogma that nothing is absolute save God and that the absolutizing of anything finite is ruinous to the finite itself.[81]

Some of Niebuhr's critics have suggested that the picture of man as a moral agent which emerges in this theocentric ethical system is that of a predominantly passive being merely reacting to situations over which he has no effective control and very little

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[81] H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Center of Value," Moral Principles of Action: Man's Ethical Imperative, ed. R.N. Ashen (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), p. 174.

effect.[82] Viewed in the dialectic of divine sovereignty, one finds that Niebuhr does indeed deny to man any hints of final determination of the course of history. But he does not deny to man a capacity to respond "artistically" and creatively to the situation which confronts him and thus to alter it significantly. Niebuhr's concern is merely to restrict the operating sphere of man to the finite and temporal realm; within that realm, however, he has genuine creativity, and for it he has responsibility. The critics stress Niebuhr's motif of "responding to" and de-emphasize his equal concern with "responsibility for." Man, for Niebuhr, both acts and is acted upon. And his action, although finite, is NOT insignificant.

Niebuhr's theology, from beginning to end, is permeated with the concept of divine sovereignty; the faith he analyzes is radically monotheistic; his response to every finite reality is determined by the dialectic of divine sovereignty. This response might be characterized as "tentative reverence."

Thus one might expect to find the same dynamic operating in Niebuhr's approach to the church: the radical exposé of the pretensions of finite reality and an equally radical affirmation of the finite values of

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[82] Hoedemaker, op. cit., p. 157; Roland A. Delattre, Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 226.

those realities as created, sustained and redeemed by the One who is infinite.

Before moving into a direct consideration of Niebuhr's concept of the church, however, we must turn now to a consideration of the place of the church within his theology and then to an analysis of his methods in looking at the church.

B. Theology and the Church in Niebuhr

Divine sovereignty leads to a kind of ontological parity among created beings: ALL are finite, and ALL are good, and this makes it possible for Niebuhr to speak of a community of being. On a more limited level, it leads to a notion of human community: the differences which divide men are relativized in light of man's ultimate ontological relation, a relation which all men share, whatever their historical- or faith-situation. The perception of this relation is inescapably conditioned by these particular situations, but that conditioning does not abolish the fundamental community among men established by their ultimate condition before God. But neither does that fundamental similarity abolish the inescapable differences that characterize men of different cultures and traditions. That human community which represents mankind by maintaining consciousness of this unity-within-plurality of man-before-God is the church. Its centrality in the thought

of Niebuhr is thus logically derivative from his main emphasis on the sovereignty of God.

As Hoedemaker aptly indicates, "Niebuhr's theology revolves around the church from beginning to end."[83] The church, for Niebuhr, is both an object and the context of theology, a fact which his critics have virtually ignored.[84]

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[83]Hoedemaker, op. cit., p. 127; his indication of that revolution, however, is lamentably brief.

[84]Hoedemaker indicates the centrality of Niebuhr's concept of the church, but that concept plays no major role in his exposition of Niebuhr, and one waits until chapter V before finding out how central it is! Frei observes Niebuhr's concern with the church and viewpoint within the church, but does not himself focus on it as an interpretive key--cf. "Niebuhr's Theological Background," op. cit., pp. 12 f., n. 5. Godsey --John D. Godsey, The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970)--lays out a brief summation of Niebuhr's concept of the church alongside other of his distinctive notions with no indication of its centrality--cf. pp. 63-72. Kliever hints at the importance of the concept of the church in Niebuhr's method, but this does not provide a key for the exposition of that method--cf. "Methodology and Christology," op. cit., pp. 93 ff. Cobb --John B. Cobb, Living Options in Protestant Theology (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962)--likewise notes the "socio-historical" character of Niebuhr's work, but makes no mention of Niebuhr's concept of the church per se--pp. 284-300.

Two possible explanations for this phenomenon come readily to mind. First, Niebuhr pointed students towards problems rather than towards those concerned with these problems; thus James M. Gustafson, whose Treasure in Earthen Vessels (New York: Harper & Row, 1961) acknowledges a heavy debt to the work of Niebuhr, rarely makes footnote reference to the particulars of that debt. Niebuhr sought and encouraged colleagues working on common problems rather than followers seeking to explicate the "master." Secondly, critics may have noted Niebuhr's frequent indications of the plight of

The church in its continual process of reformation, however, was the special interest and concern of Niebuhr.[85] When he wrote of his conception of theological inquiry, he said,

> . . . the complex object of theological study always has the three aspects of God in relation to man, of men in relation to God, and of men-before-God in relation to each other, while the method of such study consists of intensive participation in the life of Biblical, historical, and contemporary churches in their encounters with God and interactions with the "world."[86]

Yet his treatment of the church never took place outside of a particular concern for the life of the church within its cultural situation. He continued throughout his career to analyze the church's relation to society and to formulate his conception of the church out of this

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the church in society and its relativity before God and decided to concentrate on aspects of his thought which appear more fixed. Another possibility is that the major theological problem of the 60's was that of understanding the meaning of the gospel, and it was more relevant to the needs of the times to mine the ore of Niebuhr for its contribution to that problem than to be concerned about his own concerns. But any such suggestions remain merely hypothetical, and one is left with the fact of a significant gap in the work that has been done with the material Niebuhr left for posterity.

[85] Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," loc. cit., p. 249.

[86] Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, op. cit., p. 125; cf. p. 113.

analysis. At one time he wrote that the times demanded "recovery of faith in the invisible catholic church";[87] at another,

> . The mystery of the Church and the wonder of the Church present themselves to the Catholic view for new inquiry, new interpretation and then for new reformation and new direction;[88]

at still another, "The definition of the Church--even the awareness of its actuality--constitutes one of the main concerns of modern theology.[89]

In focusing this study on Niebuhr's concept of the church, then, we are not simply treating one among other of his notions. We are concentrating on that among the objects of theology which was his central concern and operating context. In order to clarify the nature of Niebuhr's concern for the church, we will look now at his conception of the relationship between the church and theology.

Summarily stated, it is this: Niebuhr regarded the church as a necessary but penultimate context of theology, and he thought of theology as a necessary but not a sufficient activity of the church.[90]

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[87]H. Richard Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1937; Torchbook edition, 1959), pp. xv f.

[88]H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Gift of the Catholic Vision," Theology Today, IV (1948), p. 520.

[89]Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, op. cit., p. 17.

[90]Cf. Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 140 ff.

Historical and religious relativism, legacies of nineteenth century historical scholarship, dictate that theology necessarily occupy the standpoint of the Christian church if it is to be Christian theology. No thought can be divorced from its historical and faith-perspective, and this means that theology takes on a confessional character.[91]

But the necessity for theology to operate within the church is not simply a requirement; it is a gift, the "gift of the Catholic vision," This gift is the historical circumstances that allow and require theology to stand in and with the Church whether it be exercising its critical, confessional, apologetic or polemic functions.[92] The gift is not simply to see the community but to see with the community that which the community sees.[93] Perhaps the more remarkable is the fact that this new angle of vision is not limited to a particular branch of the

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[91] Cf. Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 129-131, for a discussion of the sense in which Niebuhr intended his work to be confessional rather than apologetic. Hoedemaker's key insight was that Niebuhr was concerned to avoid a defensiveness that presupposed one's own community to be exclusive; by "confessional" he meant reference to "the largest possible whole in which the self ard other are included, the universal community of being," p. 131.

[92] Niebuhr, "The Gift of the Catholic Vision," loc. cit., p. 516.

[93] Ibid., p. 514.

church, but rather finds its operating context to be the church in its wholeness.[94]

Theology, then,

> . . . is differentiated from other kinds of intellectual activity by being the reflection that goes on in the church; it is therefore the kind of thinking that is directed toward God and man-before-God as its objects and which is guided by the love of God and neighbor. Both objects and motivation are important in distinguishing its special character.[95]

Niebuhr sometimes argues that the necessity for theology to be performed within the church results from the "finds" of 19th century scholarship. Critics have cited this as an occasion when Niebuhr stepped outside the standpoint of theological confessionalism into apologetics in seeking an absolute from which to start.[96] Doubtless this critique has its merit, for Niebuhr does support his confessionalism by appeals to the results "discovered" by historical, Biblical, sociological and psychological disciplines.[97] But the critique is not

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[94] Ibid., p. 516, cf. pp. 507-510; Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, op. cit., p. 12.

[95] Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, op. cit., p. 109.

[96] Cobb, op. cit., p. 293; cf. Hoedemaker, op. cit., and his citation of other critics who agree on this point, pp. 129f.

[97] Niebuhr, "The Gift of the Catholic Vision," loc. cit., pp. 507-510; The Meaning of Revelation, op. cit., pp. 7-42.

decisive against Niebuhr for three reasons, one of which has already been mentioned (his special sense of the term "confessional"). Furthermore, Niebuhr acknowledges that theology is not the only source of valid wisdom, even for the church (we will elaborate on this presently), and finally, within the church theology perceives the sovereignty of God and thus the utter relativity of all that is not-God. Radical Monotheism, which is the faith of the church, implies that neither concepts nor perceptions nor church nor faith be regarded as absolute, but only as particular and finite ways of knowing that which is absolute.[98] Theology done from this conviction is not to be understood, then, as ultimately true in some absolutist or comprehensive sense, but as more or less adequate expression (confession) of that which IS absolute, as it is perceived from the particular standpoint of the viewer--in this case, the church at a given point in time and space and culture.[99] Critics have not yet shown what position other than historical relativism ("historical relationism is probably a better term")[100] is compatible with a faith of radical monotheism.

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[98] Kliever, "Methodology and Christology," op. cit., pp. 91 f.; cf also Niebuhr, "Theology in the University," Radical Monotheism and Western Culture.

[99] Libertus A. Hoedemaker, Faith in Total Life: Style and Direction of H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology (doctoral dissertation: University of Utrecht, 1966), p. 176.

[100] Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," loc. cit., p. 249.

It is precisely the radical monotheism that requires theology to operate within the church that also dictates the church to be only a penultimate context of theology. For church theology, insofar as it remains true to itself, recognizes the demand on itself "to be first of all servant to God," not to the church.[101] The church, even in its wholeness, must not be seen as the ultimate context of theological education,[102] for this would be to assert an ecclesiastical totalitarianism which utterly contradicts radical monotheism. God, not the church, is absolute, and neither the kingdom of God nor faith is restricted to the church.[103] Theology, Niebuhr writes in discussing its place in the university, does serve the church; but it is principally charged with the service of God, and this implies service to the fellow servants of God, namely the intellectual and political societies.[104] Furthermore, theology which recognizes divine sovereignty

> removes the taboos which surround our intellectual life, making some subjects too holy to be inquired into and some too dangerous for us to venture into. Yet it grants reverence to the mind for which now no being

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[101] Niebuhr, "Theology in the University," op. cit., pp. 98f.

[102] Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, op. cit., p. 41.

[103] Niebuhr, "Theology in the University," op. cit., p. 99; "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," loc. cit., p. 249.

[104] Niebuhr, "Theology in the University," op. cit., p. 99.

> is too low to be worthy of a loving curiosity. All knowledge becomes reverent and all being is open to inquiry.[105]

Theology, then, necessarily stands in the church in order to perceive and to express, thus to understand the Christian faith and its objects; but those penultimate realities are transparent to their objects, and theology is concerned with them precisely as means of access to their objects; it thus retains a perspective from which to criticize the church and from which to receive the insights of "secular" inquiry.[106] To say that theology is confessional and done within the church in no way implies that the theologian presupposes his own faith as a methodological principle; what he presupposes is the faith of the church and himself as a member of the community which witnesses to the One from whom that faith comes and in whom it is placed.

Thus in Niebuhr's view, to be a theologian is to be a churchman; one cannot be a theologian apart from the church, even though neither the church nor its faith is the ultimate context in which the theologian stands.

But if theology requires the church, so also does the church require theology. For the church, like all finite realities, is subject to temptation and sin. Theology in its critical function provides a

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[105] Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God," op. cit., p. 125.

[106] Cf. Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background," op. cit. p. 10.

constant check against the perversions to which it is subject. They are at least three.

In the first place,

> . . . without a theory or theology the Christian movement must lose itself in emotions and sentiments or hasten to action which will be premature and futile because it is not based upon a clear analysis of the situation.[107]

The action of the church is perverted apart from a sound theological basis.

Secondly, the church faces the problem of

> . . . how at all times to be really church, obedient to Christ, not allowing the society beyond it to define for it what it ought to do or to proclaim. Withdrawal, however, into concern for doctrinal purity and liturgical correctness does not enable it to remain the church.[108]

The values of the church are perverted apart from a sound theological basis.

Thirdly, henotheism is a constant threat, one form of which involves church-centeredness.

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[107] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Towards the Independence of the Church," The Church Against the World, ed. H. Richard Niebuhr, Wilhelm Pauck and Francis P. Miller (Chicago and New York: Willett, Clark & Company, 1935), p. 153.

[108] H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Major Issues in Theological Education," Theology Today, XI (1955), p. 525 (with Daniel Day Williams and James M. Gustafson).

> . . . in church-centered faith the community of those who hold common beliefs, practice common rites, and submit to a common rule becomes the immediate object of trust and the cause of loyalty.[109]

The faith of the church is perverted apart from constant theological critiques.

But theology serves the church not only in a negative or protective fashion. It also has a positive or constructive function.

The church needs constantly to be kept in touch with the realities to which its particular language points, and its members need to remain in communication with each other. Theology can "state the grammar" of this language and thereby enhance the necessary communication,[110] not, however, without serious wrestling with the content of the language in the immediacy of personal life.[111]

Secondly, the church as witness to

> . . . the revelatory moment in its own history is required to regard all events, even though it can see most of them only from an external point of view, as workings of the God who reveals himself.[112]

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[109] Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, op. cit., p. 58.

[110] Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, op. cit., p. 18.

[111] Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," loc. cit., p. 251.

[112] Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 86.

Theology is the church's tool for perceiving and interpreting all events in the light of God's sovereign rule.

Finally, the church needs to understand itself, i.e., "to say what it stands for." This it does by means of telling the story of its life,[113] but that story cannot be adequately told from an external sociological approach. Niebuhr attempted to tell this story from such a perspective in Social Sources, and later wrote that all he had been able to discern from the viewpoint were the socially conditioned aspects of the church and not those aspects which gave the force and movement to it.[114] Theology is required for the church to understand its own internal history and thus to re-appropriate its faith.

But if Niebuhr regarded theology as an utter necessity for the church, he refused to idolize this activity or even to give it primacy in the life of the church. Niebuhr in 1929 stated that

> The effort to distinguish churchmen primarily by reference to their doctrine and to apprehend the problem of church unity from a purely theological point of view appeared to him [Niebuhr--he uses the 3d person in this preface] to be a procedure so artificial and fruitless that he found himself compelled to turn from theology to history, sociology and ethics for a more satisfactory

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[113] Ibid., pp. 47f.

[114] Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America, op. cit., pp. ixf.

> account of denominational differences and a more significant approach to the question of union.[115]

Although Niebuhr turned away from sociological reductionism in understanding the church,[116] he never wavered from his conviction that a plurality of approaches yielded a more adequate understanding than did a single view.[117]

> No simple inductive or deductive procedure is sufficiently fruitful. Yet various approaches can meet; various efforts to understand can support each other as well as be at cross purposes.[118]

Thus even in the realm of inquiry, theology is "not queen but servant" within the church.

But the church is engaged in more than intellectual activities; its purpose is "to increase among men the love of God and neighbor,"[119] and theology's place in the church is its service to this end in the

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[115] H. Richard Niebuhr, The Social Sources of Denominationalism (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1929; Reprinted with a new preface, Hamden, Conn.: The Shoe String Press, 1954, New York: Meridian Books, 1957), p. vii.

[116] Cf. Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America, op. cit.

[117] Ibid., p. 14.

[118] Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, op. cit., p. 5; Cf. The Meaning of Revelation op. cit., p. 84.

[119] Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, op. cit., p. 31.

realm of thought.[120] Intellectual activities, however, "are carried on in constant interaction with civil and moral activities and with the religious exercise of proclamation, prayer and confession."[121]

Thus Niebuhr was able to say,

> . . . important as theological formulations are for me they are not the basis of faith but only one of its expressions and that not the primary one. . . .[122]

Theology, for Niebuhr, necessarily existed in the church but could never find its final context there; the church likewise required theology for its existence yet could never rely on theology alone. Thus as a theologian Niebuhr turned to the church; as a churchman he turned to theology. In neither position was he other than a servant. We turn now to the examination of Niebuhr's method in presenting his conception of the church.

C. Niebuhr's Approach to the Church

Throughout his career Niebuhr both proclaimed and practiced a basic methodological conviction in his studies of the church: namely, the need to approach the object of study from more than one

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[120] Ibid., pp. 111-116.

[121] Niebuhr, "Theology in the University," op. cit., p. 97.

[122] Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," loc. cit., p. 250.

direction. This, for him, is a practical, a theological, a moral, and a methodological necessity.

Practically, a multiple approach is demanded by the object itself. The church is deeply involved in the ambiguities and complexities that characterize every human situation,[123] and it requires analysis from more than one direction in order to be understood adequately. Neither sociological nor theological reductionism presents a completely satisfactory picture of the church,[124] yet neither of the two approaches--the external and the internal--can be negated.[125] The church involves external manifestations and internal forces as integral parts of itself.[126] Thus,

> Partly in continuation of the Protestant doctrine, but more on the basis of Biblical studies and of sociology of religion, it may be possible to formulate the outlines

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[123] Niebuhr, Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, op. cit., p. 5.

[124] Cf. Niebuhr, The Social Sources of Denominationalism, op. cit., p. vii; Kingdom of God in America, op. cit., pp. ix-xvii.

[125] Cf. The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, op. cit., p. 5; Kingdom of God in America, op. cit., p. 14.

[126] Cf. Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, op. cit., pp. 89f.; "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," Religion in Life, XV (1945-46).

> of a doctrine of the church which will do ampler justice to the complex elements than the foregoing theories can do.[127]

Niebuhr expresses the hope that the insights of the logical and "secular" disciplines as well as practical experiments and experience in church life may "eventually be brought together in some kind of temporary historical synthesis. For the present the question of what the church is in act and potency, remains largely unanswered."[128]

Theologically, a multiple approach is demanded by the Church's faith of radical monotheism. For this faith implies the relativity of all that is not-God, and this includes intellectual concepts. Indeed, a frequent source of strife

> . . . is due to the confusion of views of the universal with universal views and to the totalitarian tendency which inclines us to believe that our outlook yields not only truth but all the truth there is. . . .[129]

Thus one is able to accord validity to the works of psychologists, historians, and sociologists in their analyses of religion, recognizing, however, "That each envisions limited aspects of experience and reality" and thus eliminating "all totalitarian 'nothing-but'

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[127] Niebuhr, "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," ibid., pp. 1'3f.

[128] Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, op. cit., p. 18.

[129] Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, op. cit., pp. 161f.

phrases."[130] Not only does radical monotheism relativize all conceptual articulations and thus negate dogmatism; it also dissolves the barriers to inquiry into certain "holy" objects and accords equal significance to all genuine search for truth. One has no grounds for rejecting truth from whatever source it may come.[131]

A somewhat different line of reasoning in support of a multi-disciplined approach to the church derives from Niebuhr's conception of the task of theology itself, i.e., the task of understanding the Christian faith. For it is his conviction that "our old phrases are worn out; they have become cliches by means of which we can neither grasp nor communicate the reality of our existence before God."[132] And it is by means of concepts and methods of such "secular" disciplines as politics, sociology, psychology and philosophy that one "may reappropriate what earlier men meant when they used their words and concepts to speak of God and salvation."[133] The issue is not simply one of re-translation, and one must beware of the danger of substituting

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[130] Ibid., pp. 180f.

[131] Cf. Niebuhr, "Theology in the University," op. cit.

[132] Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," loc. cit., p. 251.

[133] Niebuhr, "Major Issues in Theological Education," op. cit., p. 524.

the subject for the object of investigation.[134] Nevertheless, disciplines operating from perspectives other than that of the church enable one to grasp the realities to which theological language points.

Morally, a multiple approach is demanded by the church's constant temptation to social henotheism. It is the duty of the church

> . . . to accept the external views of ourselves which others have set forth and to make these external histories events of spiritual significance.[135]

For listening to the views of the church from those outside has

> . . . helped to keep the church from exalting itself as though its inner life rather than the God of that inner life were the center of its attention and the ground of its faith.[136]

Thus external views of the church which expose its finitude and sinfulness protect the faith of radical monotheism from corruption by church-centered henotheism.[137]

Yet the church must not negate its own self-perception in listening to external views. Indeed, apart from its own properly

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[134] Cf. Niebuhr, "Theology and Psychology: A Sterile Union," loc. cit., and Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, op. cit., p. 4.

[135] Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, op. cit., p. 84.

[136] Ibid., pp. 85 f.

[137] Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, op. cit., pp. 58 f.

theological understanding, external views have no meaning. Instead, "these must all be united, informed and transformed by theological understanding of man-before-God and God-with-man. . . ."[138]

Methodologically, the multiple approach is warranted by the helpful insights from the procedures of the natural sciences. From them the church has learned the necessity of a disinterested approach to its objects. The natural sciences have learned that to be of maximum benefit to mankind, they must eschew all efforts to measure their findings by the benefit they may yield to mankind.

> It is not otherwise with theology. A theological science which is interested above all in serving the needs of men becomes a science incapable of supplying real benefits. . . .[139]

Yet, while theology has learned from natural science an approach which does justice to its object, it must also learn from the scientists' concern to

> . . . guard the independence of their separate fields and methods. . . . A theology which borrows its first principles from sociology, psychology or ethics has become a part of one of these sciences, and, since it has no independent point of view or object, the result of its researches have been determined from the start.

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[138] Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, op. cit., p. 115.

[139] Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," op. cit., p. 102.

> It is vain to expect any new knowledge from such a science.[140]

Thus the need to approach the object of theology from more than a single direction derives not only from the insights into the object offered by alien disciplines, but also from their methodology.

The demand for a multiple approach to the study of the church is thus very clear to Niebuhr. The way of meeting that demand, however, is problematic.

For Niebuhr retains a deep suspicion of the social sciences. Sometimes he even appears to doubt whether they are capable of investigating the church at all. He gives at least three reasons for this suspicion: First, sociology "deals with static and passive rather than with dynamic Christianity in America . . . ,"[141] and "the true church is not an organization but the organic movement of those who have been 'called out' and 'sent.'"[142] Secondly,

> Much social science, including the sociology of religion, has tended to erect society itself into a kind of first principle, the source of all human movements and institutions. It has not only described the relations of religion to other functions in social life but seemed to explain it as nothing but a social function. When the church has accepted this view of itself it

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[140] Idem.

[141] Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America, op. cit., p. 12.

[142] Ibid., p. xiv.

> has given evidence of its complete fall into worldliness, for now it has substituted civilization or society for God as author and end of its being.[143]

Theology must at all times be on guard against attempts to regard the church or faith or God as means to some social end, for this is to lapse into social henotheism.[144] In the third place, persons seeking to examine the church from a "disinterested" viewpoint face the question of a norm by which to delimit the scope of their investigation, and any norm selected from this perspective is arbitrary. A common answer is to define the church as "a religious institution (which) provides for the practice of the Christian religion as a human group."[145] But the next step, i.e., specifying the Christian religion, is impossible from outside. There is "no single norm of the Christian religion which enables an observer to say that the religious institution which possesses the character described is 'really' Christian."[146] The norm of the church, Jesus Christ, is visible as normative only within

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[143] Niebuhr, "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," op. cit., p. 123; Cf. "The Protestant Movement and Democracy," Religion in American Life, Vol. I, The Shaping of American Religion, ed. James Ward Smith and A. Leland Jamison (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 49.

[144] Cf. Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, op. cit., and "Utilitarian Christianity," loc. cit.

[145] Niebuhr, "The Norm of the Church," loc. cit., p.

[146] Ibid., p. 9.

the church. The social sciences can never be quite trusted to give an accurate and an adequate portrayal of the church, although their findings cannot be ignored.

These two convictions--the necessity of and yet the suspicion of external views of the church--focus the problem Niebuhr faces in investigating that part of the object of theology which deals with men-before-God in relation to each other. Yet to pose the problem in this manner is to abstract from the rich complexity of Niebuhr's work. It never arose for him in the abstract, but only in relation to his ongoing dialogue with the contemporary ecclesiastical and cultural situation which he pursued from a position within the church. Its resolutions were always intimately connected to what he perceived as needs of the time and to his current insights into the nature and task of the church. A major task of the ensuing chapters, therefore, will be to indicate the development of his resolutions of this methodological problem in relation to both his concerns as a churchman and his insights into the church; this will allow us to observe not only the content of Niebuhr's resolutions but their relevance as well. We turn now to that task.

CHAPTER II

THE TWENTIES: IDEAL VS. REAL CHURCH

With this chapter we begin a direct exploration of Niebuhr's four ways of conceiving the relationship between internal and external views of the church. The first two presuppose a significantly different object for the views, and the relationship between them depends on how these objects are related. The second two ways hold that both views examine the same complex object and account for their differences in terms of the viewers' standpoints. The relationship here depends on how the two standpoints are related to each other. This schema is not intended as a wholly adequate descriptive classification of Niebuhr's comments--his work is too complex for that--but it is a useful heuristic device for permitting the exploration of complex and rich views which bear strong "family resemblances."

Our procedure will be first, to identify the way of relating the two views of the church and to set it in the context of Niebuhr's development. Second, we will examine in detail the external and internal views of the church in order to identify their respective insights into the church. Third, we will examine more closely Niebuhr's way of

relating the two views of the church and attempt a brief assessment of its adequacy.

By proceeding in this fashion we will be able to note the shifts of emphasis in Niebuhr's thought about the church and to observe their relationship to his development. The four ways which we are considering correspond roughly and with considerable overlapping to the four decades of his career.

How, then, does Niebuhr understand the relationship between external and internal views of the church?

A. Historical Context

The first of his "answers" to the question is reflected in his early writings which led up to the publication in 1929 of The Social Sources of Denominationalism.[1] In these works, Niebuhr finds one view normative and the other descriptive: external (particularly sociological) accounts of the church are descriptive of institutional church life whereas theology (the internal view) presents a picture of the church as it ought to become. The two views thus have different

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[1] H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Alliance Between Labor and Religion," Theological Magazine of the Evangelical Synod of North America, XLIX (1921), pp. 197-203. "What Holds Churches Together?" Christian Century, XLIII (1926), pp. 346-348. "Churches That Might Unite," Christian Century, XLVI (1929), pp. 259-261. "Christianity and the Industrial Classes," Theological Magazine of the Evangelical Synod of North America, LVII (1929), pp. 12-18.

objects: the former analyzes the "real" church and the latter, the ideal. Moreover, the content of the views reveals an inescapable tension between the ideal and its expression: the "ideal" and "real" statements about the church necessarily conflict. Nevertheless they are held together by the obligation on the "real" church to evaluate itself by the ideal and, if not ever to express that ideal adequately, at least to acknowledge its failure in this regard.

We will return to a more careful analysis of this answer after having examined its context in Niebuhr's development and the content of the internal and external views he set forth.

In reflecting on his career, Niebuhr indicates that the period prior to the 30's found him heavily influenced by the liberal movement, particularly in his basic methodological convictions of historical relativism--"Historical relationism is probably a better term"--, religious empiricism and Neo-Kantian epistemology.[2] His intellectual biographers, particularly L.A. Hoedemaker[3] and Hans Frei,[4] have painstakingly illumined the various threads of 19th century continental and American liberalism which Niebuhr wove together in the fabric

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[2]H. Richard Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," loc. cit., p. 249.

[3]Hoedemaker, op. cit.

[4]Frei, loc. cit.

of his thought.[5] We need note here only that Kant, Schleiermacher, Weber, Harnack, G.H. Mead, Josiah Royce, D.C. MacIntosh and pre-eminantly Ernst Troeltsch were among his mentors during the formative decade of his career.

It has not been noted, however, that the choice of direction represented by these mentors was completely consistent with the particular denominational tradition with which he was intimately involved during this decade. The Niebuhr of the 20's was a brilliant young man of the institutional church.

The Evangelical Synod of North America was a denomination formed in 1840 as Der Deutsche Evangelische Kirchenverein des Westens by the merger of a number of independent congregations of 19th century German immigrants.[6] This particular group of immigrants was a curious mixture of pietists and rationalists who had experienced the ravages of the Napoleonic Wars.[7]

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[5] Cf. Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 7-17; Frei, loc. cit., pp. 16-40.

[6] T.W. Menzel, "Frontier Beginnings," A History of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, ed. David Dunn, Paul N. Crusius, Josias Friedli, Theophil W. Menzel, Carl E. Schneider, William Toth, and James E. Wagner (Philadelphia: The Christian Education Press, 1961), pp. 158f., 171.

[7] T.W. Menzel, "European Background--Evangelical," ibid., p. 147; cf. Carl E. Schneider, The German Church on the American Frontier (St. Louis, Missouri: Eden Publishing House, 1939), pp. 465f.

The peculiarity of the Kirchenverein was its "distinctively liberal temper";[8] in marked contrast to the Missouri Synod Lutherans, the Evangelical Synod exhibited an almost casual attitude towards doctrinal intricacies and proclaimed itself unwilling to subject faith "to the priority of one or another set of confessional statements."[9]

By the turn of the century, the immigrants' frontier settlements had given way to prosperous farming communities where German remained the common tongue and where the church was an integral part of the culture.

Into this ecclesiastical-cultural context, H. Richard Niebuhr was born in 1894 in Wright City, Missouri. His father, Gustav, was minister of the local Evangelical Church, and an atmosphere of genial erudition pervaded the home.[10] Reinhold and Richard both absorbed their father's religious conviction and social concern, and both

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[8]Schneider, ibid., p. 464.

[9]Adolph H. Baltzer, Sermon at Conference of 1868, quoted in Paul N. Crusius, "Western Consolidation," A History of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, op. cit., p. 192. Operative doctrinal standards included the Augsburg Confession and the Lutheran and Heidleberg Catechisms; see Carl E. Schneider, "Journey Into Union," ibid., p. 283.

[10]June Bingham, Courage to Change: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), pp. 49-65.

elected to follow his footsteps into the ministry "Because," Reinhold is quoted as saying, "you're the most interesting man in town."[11]

By 1920, H. Richard Niebuhr had completed degrees at Elmhurst College and Eden Seminary, had served two years as pastor of a church in St. Louis, and had taken up a position of teacher at Eden, the small denominational seminary in Webster Groves, Missouri. In 1922 he went to Yale where he completed his B.D. and Ph.D. degrees by 1924. He returned to assume the presidency of Elmhurst College (1924-27) during which time he helped it to become fully accredited[12] and worked with the board to secure adequate financial support for academic pursuits.[13] In 1927 he resumed his academic work when he resigned his administrative post and returned to the faculty of Eden. Thus, except for his brief stay at Yale, Niebuhr spent the 20's immersed in the academic life of the Evangelical Synod.

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[11] Ibid., p. 58.

[12] Ibid., p. 62; cf. John D. Godsey, The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr in the series The Promise of Theology, ed. Martin E. Marty (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1970), p. 13.

[13] Paul N. Crusius, "The Postwar Era," A History of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, op. cit., p. 257.

These times also saw Niebuhr immersed in the liberal temper of the decade. Social reform was a visible need, particularly with respect to the labor problem (this was the era of Reinhold's celebrated battle with Ford in Detroit), and he laments the church's ineffectiveness in dealing with social ills:

> So akin by nature, so closely connected in history, Christianity and the labor movement might have been allies and seed-plots for each other's truth. That this has not been the case is the tragedy of both labor and the church. . . . The church has lost not only the social enthusiasm and the energy of the labor class movement, but has failed also to appropriate for itself the spiritual qualities which labor could give it; on the other hand it received from its connection with the leisure class qualities which stand often enough in direct contrast with spiritual realities: worldliness and satisfaction with the things that are . . . a practical belief in the class-division of mankind into upper and lower groups and a spirit of narrow nationalism and racial prejudice.[14]

> Measured by the standard of service, the church will find itself sadly lacking as a social institution; realizing the vital truth of the supremacy of human individuality and of the sole desirability of the Kingdom of God we will not fail to accuse ourselves of having set our own interests as a churchly institution before these.[15]

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[14] H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Alliance Between Labor and Religion," loc. cit., pp. 201f.

[15] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Christianity and the Social Problem," Theological Magazine of the Evangelical Synod of North America, L (1922), pp. 280f; cf. "Christianity and the Industrial Classes, loc. cit., pp. 16ff.; "Churches that Might Unite," loc. cit., pp. 258-261.

Niebuhr worked in this area to find the cause and the cure for the church's social impotence. He sought to account for the church's division from labor and found it to come at the point of the latter's use of force. But the basis of the church's opposition has not been the ethics of Christ but interest in its own salvation. The church has interpreted her gospel of the cross and forgiveness to mean yielding to unjust social conditions instead of reforming them, and this means it has condoned the sin of society and valued law and order more than righteousness. Forgiveness, however, should be directed

> . . . to the enemy against whose sin relentless warfare is to continue that he may be saved along with his victims. . . . Not until the church is ready to fight the same battle that labor is fighting, but by the better method of aggressive suffering, will it be in a position to declare against labor's method in the fight.[16]

The rejection of labor's violence has led to alliance with labor's enemies, and

> The Church countenances those methods on the part of capital which it decried when labor used them, and because of which it forsook labor, --war, force and bloodshed.[17]

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[16] Niebuhr, "The Alliance Between Labor and Religion," loc. cit., p. 202.

[17] Ibid., p. 203.

The church refused to acknowledge her selfish interest, and Niebuhr called for her to be willing to "stand alone" in Christ without losing her soul either to labor or to capital.[18]

The task of the church, then, is to take an active part in the social revolutions of the day, NOT to withdraw into pious enclaves.

> The primary condition for Christendom and the church to fulfill if they would assist in the construction of a more Christian social order will be the abandonment of an attitude of self-righteousness, whole-hearted recognition of their share in the sin of the world and their express repentance for the evils of that social life, of which they ought to have been the conscience.[19]

That task, however, is not simply to urge the action of the state against injustice, but rather to create a new set of morals out of which people will live: "as yet the churches have scarcely begun to use the power which they possess for preventing the evils that they urge the state to rectify by legislation."[20] Preaching, teaching and embodying the "higher righteousness" are tools which the church has barely begun to use. Reforms for which the church needs to work are directed towards creating a moral sense to combat rampant individualism and towards propagating the principle of service in

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[18] Idem.

[19] Niebuhr, "Christianity and the Social Problem," loc. cit., p. 280.

[20] Ibid., p. 284.

order to combat depersonalization. Its methods must be sympathetic, definite and Christian:

> But the most effective method at the disposal of the church to hasten the growth of a Christian social order, is the method of self-sacrifice for its ideals and convictions.[21]

The church's decline among industrial workers points out its own shortcomings which must be remedied if effective social action is to be taken. They are three: (1) the church has obscured its own ethical stand by allying itself with repressors; (2) the church has spoken in language and imagery unintelligible to secular workers; and (3) the church has failed

> . . . to show clearly that faith makes a difference in the individual and in the social life,--in its abandonment of conversion on the one hand and of millenarianism on the other hand.[22]

In the midst of his reforming zeal, Niebuhr published another insight: that a contemporary revival of monasticism among Protestants might be in order. For the activists have become newly aware of the "steepness" of Jesus' ethics and of the intransigence of history in conforming to them.

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[21] Ibid., p. 291.

[22] Niebuhr, "Christianity and the Industrial Classes," loc. cit., pp. 16 f.

> With this disillusionment and the realization of the utter steepness of the demand of Jesus there has come upon Christians in general and upon many proponents of the social gospel in particular a new resurgence of the old pessimism so far as this present world is concerned.[23]

But precisely for the sake of a continuing and efficacious battle against social ills, something like a new monasticism may be in order.

> A complex era demands simplicity; a luxurious and self-indulgent age requires hardness and martyrdom; and a materialistic time is moving toward mysticism. Perhaps simplicity, hardness and mysticism seem attainable in other ways than by monasticism, but the golden mean is never practicable. Progress comes only by the over-emphasis of antithesis. . . . There is nothing unsocial about this attitude. It is not for love of self the monk retires from the world but for love of his bretheren who may be saved by no other means.[24]

This "interlude of spirituality" in Niebuhr's more socially directed analyses definitely presages his call for church withdrawal from compromising entanglements which came to light in the 30's. But it remains different from them. For here Niebuhr is radicalizing the social concern to its ultimate depth. It remains, however, social concern aimed at love for the neighbor. Later that concern is

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[23] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Back to Benedict?," Christian Century, XLII (1925), p. 860.

[24] Ibid., pp. 860f.

temporarily superceded as Niebuhr moved dialectically towards stress on the love of God. Here, however, one finds him probing beneath the surface issues and analyses of social ills and suggesting a radical sign of possibility which deals with the pessimism threatening to vitiate the social gospel movement.

All of these analyses, however, had exposed the complicity of the institutional church in the social problems of the time; denominationalism simply does not promote, provide or express the kind of radical discontinuity required for effective social action. It was too encrusted with the values and the prejudices it was called to overcome. The denominations had become pawns of culture.

Concern for social justice, a legacy of his denominational heritage, was thus leading Niebuhr into the harsh critique of denominationalism per se which was to culminate in The Social Sources of Denominationalism.

But if his ecclesiastical environment thus fostered his disillusionment with the efficacy of denominational structures, so also did it provide him an avenue of redress.

In 1925 Dr. Samuel Press, then president of Eden, and John Baltzer, President General of the Evangelical Synod, attended the Stockholm conference on Life and Work, an immediate predecessor of the World Council of Churches, the theme of which was "The Church's Responsibility

for the Total Life of Mankind."[25] They returned with glowing reports[26] which resulted in the General Conference authorizing the appointment of a Commission on Closer Relations with other Church Bodies.[27] Ecumenism seemed a way towards reform.

In 1928, Dr. Baltzer finally appointed the Commission which began immediately to deal with a proposal for merger with the Reformed Church. Overtures had been made in the form of a letter from its President, A.R. Bartholomew some years earlier.[28] Negotiations which were to lead to the formation in 1934 of the Evangelical and Reformed Church were thus initiated by this Commission almost immediately and its activities received the enthusiastic support of the General Conference in 1929. Its chairman was H. Richard Niebuhr.[29]

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[25]Cf. Robert McAfee Brown, The Ecumenical Revolution (rev. ed.; Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor-Image Book, 1969), pp. 30, 416.

[26]Carl E. Schneider, "Journey into Mission," A History of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, op. cit., p. 281.

[27]Julius H. Horstmann and Herbert H. Wernecke, Through Four Centuries: The Story of the Beginnings of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, in the Old World and the New, from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century (St. Louis, Missouri: Eden Publishing House, 1938), p. 113.

[28]Ibid., pp. 113 f.

[29]Schneider, "Journey into Mission," loc. cit., p. 282. See Horstmann and Wernecke, op. cit., p. 114.

Already in 1926 Niebuhr had shown his ecumenical interest in an essay entitled "What Holds Churches Together?" published in the Christian Century.[30] At that time he had advanced the thesis that denominations have bases that are primarily social and NOT doctrinal. Nationality, race and economic class account not only for the particular forms which organizations take but also for the ideology or theology by which they identify themselves. Thus any ecumenism which intends success must consider more than doctrinal differences. The problem of church unity, he insists, is not theological.

In 1929 Niebuhr again asserts his convictions of the social bases of church division, and here his critique of the ecumenical movement's rhetoric is explicit.[31]

> . . . it is becoming increasingly evident to students of denominationalism that its sources are sociological rather than theological, and that its cure must be ethical rather than doctrinal. . . . the victory of harmony over disharmony cannot be attained without the prior triumph of Christian ethics over the ethics of nature.[32]

Thus prospects of a unified church are glum indeed.

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[30] Loc. cit.

[31] Throughout his career he remained on the fringes of the Ecumenical Movement often criticizing its apparent directions. We will have occasion to note these critiques as we proceed.

[32] Niebuhr, "Churches That Might Unite," loc. cit., p. 259.

In fact three forces could overcome the present

> . . . disintegrating effect of social disharmony on the churches . . . --political power, the suasion of a completely Christian ethics, and the attraction of social affinity.[33]

Of the three, the latter seems most likely to be effective in combatting "some of the evils of the prevalent anarchy,"[34] although it does not even attempt to achieve the elusive ideal of church union. Mergers among socially similar denominations are thus desirable but by no means sufficient.

> Meanwhile the dilemma of the church remains this: how can it preach effectively the doctrine of brotherhood between classes, nations and races until it practices that doctrine itself, but--and here is the most baffling aspect of our problem--how can it practice that doctrine until brotherhood between classes nations and races has been established?[35]

This, then, represents the immediate context of Niebuhr's major work of the period, Social Sources of Denominationalism, and offers a clue towards understanding its particular aims and emphases. Niebuhr, the brilliant churchman, shared his denomination's liberalism which led towards the critique of denominations and was appointed by his denomination to chair a commission that would attempt to

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[33] Ibid., p. 260.

[34] Idem.

[35] Ibid., p. 261.

combat the perversions of denominationalism through the creation of a new denomination.

Niebuhr himself makes no mention whatsoever of these circumstances surrounding his work. In fact he is remembered as quite reticent about his personal concerns and activities, a trait not altogether commensurate with his stress on context as the key to understanding a work. But of SSD, he says that it is a "practical contribution to the ethical problem of denominationalism" and attributes its ancestry to

> . . . a course in "symbolics" which the author [sic] was called upon to teach some years ago. The effort to distinguish churches primarily by reference to their doctrine and to approach the problem of church unity from a purely theological point of view appeared to him to be a procedure so artificial and fruitless that he found himself compelled to turn from theology to history, sociology and ethics for a more satisfactory account of denominational differences and a more significant approach to the question of union.[36]

The preceding examination of Niebuhr's social and ecumenical concerns shows this to be no exercise in intellectual abstraction, but a study undertaken with the intention of enabling the church better to serve its mission in the world.

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[36]H. Richard Niebuhr, The Social Sources of Denominationalism (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1929; reprinted with new preface, Hamden, Conn.: The Shoe String Press, 1954; New York: Meridian Books, 1957), p. vii.

We turn now to an analysis of the results and method of this study.

B. The Church

The object of this study is the church organized into denominations which neatly follow economic, political and cultural divisions. The denominations thus incarnate, not Christian brotherhood, but social division. They are visible tangible contradictions of their own proclamation of organic unity among men.[37] The essay thus has an ecumenical interest, but explores that interest from the perspective of the church's involvement in social divisions.

The church, according to Niebuhr,

> . . . as an organization interested in self-preservation and in the gain of power, has sometimes found the counsel of the Cross quite as inexpedient as have national and economic groups.[38]

As an attempt to incorporate Christianity, it cannot escape from "Conspiracy and connivance with the worldly interests it despises";[39] every embodiment of an ideal sacrifices certain elements of the ideal. But neither can the church flee from ambiguity into an "asceticism

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[37] Ibid., p. 7.

[38] Ibid., p. 3.

[39] Ibid., p. 5.

which seeks purity at the cost of service"[40] without contradiction of its own ethics. Thus compromise inevitably characterizes the church and forces the Christian to seek

> . . . the last source of righteousness outside himself and the world in the divine aggression, in a justification that is by faith.[41]

But the denominational organization of Christianity has refused to acknowledge its compromise with the world and thus has compounded its impurity with hypocrisy. Niebuhr's intention in this work is to combat the hypocritical identification of denominational organizations with the Christian ideal, not in the first instance, to close the gap between the ideal and the real. His aim is to expose the tension between the proclamation and the practice of the ecclesiastical organizations in order that repentance may take the place of false pride.

The church as organized into denominations is as essentially related to society as it is estranged from its ideals. In fact economic, political and cultural forces provide the occasion for ecclesiastical divisions and determine the forms which the religious

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[40] Idem.

[41] Idem.

dynamic takes.[42] These forces first affect the organizational structures of religious groups, but these in turn directly determine their doctrine;[43] thus no element of church life is immune from the influences of its societal context. The classic example of the impact of social forces on the church may be seen in the church-sect distinction observed by Weber and Troeltsch.[44]

> . . . the denominations, churches, sects are sociological groups whose principle of differentiation is to be sought in their conformity to the order of social classes and castes. It would not be true to affirm that the denominations are not religious groups with religious purpose, but it is true that they represent the accommodation of religion to the caste system. They are emblems, therefore, of the victory of the world over the church, of the secularization of Christianity, of the church's sanction of that divisiveness which the church's gospel condemns.[45]

One must take care in reading this work not to equate the societal influence on the church with the "evils of denominationalism" which Niebuhr deplores. His point is not that social conditioning per se is evil; indeed he wants to affirm adaptation as one means of making the gospel available to all sorts of men[46] while yet

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[42] Ibid., p. 27.

[43] Ibid., p. 17.

[44] Ibid., pp. 17ff.

[45] Ibid., p. 25.

[46] Ibid., p. 21.

acknowledging the dimension of compromise attendant on adaptation. The church, however, is always and inescapably moulded by society; its sin is its refusal to recognize this conditioning and compromise thus finding its justification in itself and relinquishing its transcendent perspective. The evil of denominationalism is

> . . . the failure of the churches to transcend the social conditions which fashion them into caste-organizations, to sublimate their loyalties to standards and institutions only remotely relevant if not contrary to the Christian ideal, to resist the temptation of making their own self-preservation and extension the primary object of their endeavor.[47]

The evil is thus a matter of misplaced loyalty not necessitated by the simple fact of social influence on the church. As we will have occasion to note later, Niebuhr is not altogether clear concerning this matter. At times he seems to equate the evil with social influence and at other times, with the failure to acknowledge this influence. The latter is his announced aim, but we will have occasion to question it later.

Niebuhr proceeds in this work to illustrate the social complicity of denominations using the church-sect typology of Troeltsch.[48]

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[47] Idem.

[48] Cf. Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), Vol. II, pp. 993-1013.

His procedure is to trace the operation of social forces on organized Christianity through history and to show the parallel changes in social conditions and in religious structures.

Economic imbalance is a major contributor to ecclesiastical disunity, for the interests and needs of the poor are quite different from those of the bourgeoisie. Niebuhr cautions against an exclusively economic interpretation of ecclesiastical history, but he insists on giving economic forces due regard.[49]

> The source of a religious movement, therefore, need not be economic for its results to take on a definitely economic character. On the other hand, economic conditions may supply the occasion for the rise of a new religious movement without determining its religious value.[50]

The typical operation of economic forces forms a definite pattern:

> . . . one phase of the history of denominationalism reveals itself as the story of the religiously neglected poor, who fashion a new type of Christianity which corresponds to their distinctive needs, who rise in the economic scale under the influence of religious discipline, and who, in the midst of a freshly acquired cultural respectability, neglect the new poor succeeding them on the lower plane. This pattern recurs with remarkable regularity in the history of Christianity.[51]

The religious organizations of the poor are of the sect-type:

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[49] Social Sources . . ., op. cit., pp. 27f.

[50] Ibid., p. 28.

[51] Idem.

exclusive, individualistic, voluntary associations[52] stressing emotional spontaneity and experience, social salvation and apocalypticism and ethical asceticism.[53] These have often provided a new creative impetus in Christian history, but "by its very nature the sectarian type of organization is valid only for one generation."[54] Children and accumulation of economic goods soon produces concerns that promote a church-type organization.

The church-type organization is marked by inclusive membership; its peculiar emphases are the universalism of the gospel and the importance of its sacramental and administrative system and adherence to the ethics of its surrounding culture.[55]

The transition from sect to church follows precisely the process of economic advance from poverty to affluence. Yet the 19th and 20th centuries have seen a disruption of this cyclic process. The revolutionary emphases of the disinherited have taken on a secular character, partly because of the absence of a social element promising

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[52] Ibid., pp. 17ff.

[53] Ibid., pp. 18f.; 30f.

[54] Ibid., p. 19.

[55] Ibid., pp. 17f.

> . . . salvation from the various mundane hells in which the poor suffer for other sins besides their own.[56]

This loss of the religious emphases of the poor seriously impoverishes the church of the present.[57]

But economics is far from the only social factor producing the plethora of denominations. Cultural factors derived from national identification are another.

> Denominations, like the nations of which they are originally a part, are separated and kept distinct by differences of language and habitual modes of thought. . . .[58]

Niebuhr finds the identification of Christianity with the Roman state to be no contradiction to the universalistic emphases of Jesus and Paul, for that state was virtually co-terminous with the civilized world. Yet it contained ominous forebodings:

> For not only would the state's interest in the church and the church's interest in the state be certain henceforth to bring ecclesiastical schism in the wake of political separations, but the accommodation of Christianity to the prevalent culture, which the position of a privileged church made inevitable, was bound to involve the church in every disintegration of cultural unity.[59]

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[56] Ibid., p. 74.

[57] Ibid., p. 76.

[58] Ibid., p. 110.

[59] Ibid., p. 112.

The social forces of nationalism operate somewhat differently from those of economics. Identification with a state or a particular culture produces a church based on the institutional principle of social organization wherein authoritative structures and standards of doctrine and means of grace dominate.[60] Furthermore,

> These churches are doctrinal and liturgical in character, regarding conformity to creed and ritual as the essential requirements of Christianity.[61]

The third characteristic of national churches is their restriction of ethics to individual or family concerns.[62] In all cases, the interests of the church are parallel to those of the state, and any dimensions of Christianity potentially threatening to national security are carefully pared away.

Another set of social forces affecting denominational divisions in America are sectional: North-South and East-West, understood as cultural and not simply geographical entities, contained forces which contributed markedly to ecclesiastical disunity.[63]

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[60] Ibid., p. 125.

[61] Ibid., p. 12.

[62] Ibid., p. 129.

[63] Ibid., pp. 136 f.

Racial division and the conflicts surrounding it precipitated a schism in many denominations in North and South, and the frontier culture of the West could not be adequately expressed in the religious organizations of the East.[64]

Finally, the social forces of European immigration to America, attracted by practical democracy, free land, and separation of church and state, affected the organizations of Christianity. Chief among the factors determining the shape of immigrant churches is the separation of church and state.

> On the one hand that separation has given to each immigrant group the privilege of maintaining and developing its own religious faith; on the other hand it has placed the immigrant churches in an environment of free competition, unprotected and unmolested by state interference, and so it has provided the background for a process of religious accommodation, of a kind of religious Americanization.[65]

Thus the forces of secular society--economics, culture, nationality, geography and race--have all contributed significantly to the disunity apparent in Christendom with its denominations. The organizations of Christianity are highly susceptible to the influence of their particular social context; indeed, Niebuhr argues that the social context DETERMINES the form of organization. On the one hand this

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[64] Ibid., p. 137.

[65] Ibid., p. 201. Cf. Will Herberg, Protestant-Catholic-Jew, (new ed. rev.; Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., Anchor Books, 1960).

means that the resources of the gospel are made available to all manner of men; on the other, it means that the church functions to enshrine human disunity and thus to obscure its own message. Organizational structure, theology and ethics are rooted in "the relationship of the religious life to the cultural and political conditions prevailing in any group of Christians. . . ."[66]

Ironically, it is society itself which now stands in judgment over human disunity:

> . . . in its saner moments it becomes aware that it can save neither its self-esteem nor its existence nor get the finer values its thinkers, prophets artists and toiling masses have wrought out unless it is made captive to some compelling and integrating ideal which will restore to it a sense of the whole and will equip it with an ethics commensurate with the scope of its interests and of its world-embracing organization.[67]

Civilization now demands synthesis and unity achieved through a common world-view and ethics[68] for which it looks to religion. And yet the church as presently organized into denominations cannot provide the unity demanded by society. Furthermore a unity achieved

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[66]Niebuhr, Social Sources . . ., op. cit., p. 16; cf. "Christianity and the Industrial Classes," loc. cit., pp. 17ff.

[67]Niebuhr, Social Sources . . ., op. cit., p. 266.

[68]Ibid., p. 268.

solely as result of social pressures would remain devoid of ethical import.[69]

Civilization needs to be faced with the Christian gospel.

> For the proclamation of this Christianity of Christ and the Gospels a church is needed which has transcended the divisions of the world and has adjusted itself not to the local interests and needs of classes, races, or nations but to the common interests of mankind and to the constitution of the unrealized kingdom of God.[70]

Characteristics of such a church include international fellowship, love of enemy and neighbor, practice of non-resistance, communism of love in economic distribution, complete racial fellowship, and equality of opportunity for sharing the common task and the common love.[71]

The church, then, as Niebuhr describes it in this work, is a social organization which is predominantly passive in its relationships with its cultural context. It is " . . . one social institution alongside many others, a phase of the total civilization more frequently conditioned by other cultural tendencies than conditioning them."[72] The church is thus a collection of human organizations claiming to represent the Christian gospel but actually representing social values.

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[69] Ibid., pp. 270 ff.

[70] Ibid., pp. 280.

[71] Ibid., pp. 280 f.

[72] Ibid., pp. 264 f.

In this sense it is necessarily inferior to its own ideals, but capable of witnessing to them by maintaining a posture of repentance. Its particular and unnecessary sin is its refusal to acknowledge this inferiority, its preferring instead to flaunt its form as manifestation of its ideal.

The viewpoint which Niebuhr intends in presenting this description of the church is distinctively non-theological but rather sociological;[73] it thus constitutes an "external" view of the church. At this point, however, we must attend more closely to the point of view in order to observe the correlation in this work between viewpoint and its object.

Niebuhr's concern in SSD is to view the church as it is impacted by society, particularly in its organizational dimension, thus to illumine a dimension of the church that had not been attended to by theology but which is of grave concern to the ecumenical discussion.[74] The object of this view is a real social institution.

Theology, by implication, deals in other matters. Its concern--thus the object of the internal view of the church--is the Christian ideal, the ideal of organic unity in Christ that is implied in

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[73] Ibid., p. vii.

[74] Idem.

the Gospel and by which the church is to be measured.

In Social Sources, however, Niebuhr does not present simply an external view of the church. In fact he makes extensive use of theologically-derived value judgments in deploring the perversity of denominationalism. On the one hand his source of value is the world which is desperately searching for a common world-view and ethics to stave off the destructive forces set loose by divided loyalties and ideals.[75] On the other hand, the standard of measurement is the CHURCH--NOT, however, the church characterized by worldliness or otherworldliness.[76] Rather it is the church characterized by conformity with the ideals of the Gospel, particularly those ideals which relate to unity and fellowship in the midst of differences.[77]

Niebuhr briefly describes that church in his concluding remarks, and his description definitely presages his subsequent reflections on the church from an internal standpoint. This church is marked by international fellowship, inclusive brotherhood and shared resources. It cannot be identified with any institutional form which it has assumed in history, although

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[75] Ibid., pp. 265 f.

[76] Ibid., pp. 269-278.

[77] Ibid., p. 280.

> . . . it has always existed within the churches. It is no mere vision born of desire. It is a fellowship with a long history and a record of many victories. . . . It has functioned in every movement of mercy and reconciliation. . . . Again and again it has been the creative center of movements of the spirit which have penetrated the world.[78]

Adjustment to the "common interests of mankind and to the constitution of the unrealized kingdom of God"[79] distinguishes this movement from any of the other expressions of Christendom which adhere to narrower standards.

This fellowship of believers is no mere ideal; it is alive and well in history, and it alone offers the answer to the world's deepest needs. But to be effective, that movement needs increase:

> It is the church which can save the churches from the ruin of their secularism and consequent division. It challenges the world to reveal its better nature and to find unity and peace in the knowledge of the divine love upon which all stable and just social life must be built.[80]

Here Niebuhr presents another object--the church as a community of faith in God transcending penultimate divisions, as dynamic movement of men of faith, as influential in the social order, and as somehow present in history. These are all themes which he

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[78] Ibid., p. 282.

[79] Ibid., p. 280.

[80] Ibid., pp. 283f.

subsequently elaborated and analyzed in relation to the ecclesiastical institution. Nevertheless the basic terms in which he was to conceive the church were all present in Social Sources.

Immersed in the life of the denominational church and frustrated by its failure to implement social reform, Niebuhr saw the necessity of analyzing the actual role of the denominations in society. It is as if as a socially sensitive churchman, Niebuhr had to expose the complicity of denominational Christianity with social divisions--indeed, its determination by them--in order to abolish the naiveté surrounding both ecumenical and reforming endeavors. Sociology provided an excellent tool for such an undertaking with its insights into the origin and development of religious institutions. Niebuhr took pains to show the contradiction between this process and the ideals proclaimed by the churches, and he convicted the institutions of hypocrisy in denying this contradiction. But once this was done and the religious institutions properly castigated, he refused to identify the church with either those institutions or with the ideals by which they were judged. This led him to identify the "authentic" church which remained quite distinct from the denominations even though it resided "within" them.

The external view of the church perceives the "real" church--the ecclesiastical organization vis à vis society. The

internal view perceives the ideals of the gospel by which the organization is measured. But within the "real"--i.e., the organized--church, however, Niebuhr finds the AUTHENTIC church, i.e., the church which conforms to the Christian ideals.

Nevertheless the "ideal vs. real" schema is a useful device for discussing the viewpoints in this book. For, in the first place, Niebuhr never clearly indicates the standpoint from which this "authentic" church is visible, an issue he examines at length in subsequent works. Secondly, reference to the "authentic" church is limited to the last three pages of the book; it thus represents something of an afterthought not germane to his main argument; it is worthy of note because of its later prominence. The bulk of the work depends on the ideal--real distinction, with the internal or theological view limited to consideration of the Christian ideal and the external view focused on the "real" church, i.e., the denominational organizations.

C. The Two Views of the Church

The external view of the church thus has as its object the religious institution in its social context; the internal or theological view on the other hand concentrates on the ideal church--i.e., the church as it ought to become. How are the two views related?

The internal view is normative, the external, descriptive. They remain forever distinguishable because of the inevitable tension which resides between the ideal and its embodiment. Niebuhr's skepticism towards an ecumenism which seeks universality in visible organization rests on his understanding of the church as distinguished essentially from the Gospel which it bears. But his criticism of the cultural capitulation of religious organizations rests on his understanding of the church as related necessarily to the ideals which it bears.[81] The posture of the church as social institution is that of repentance, and in that posture it is paradoxically the faithful exemplar of the Word. Both normative and descriptive accounts of the church are necessary to maintain this posture.

At this point, however, ambiguity creeps in. For what is the ideal by which the denominations are to be assessed? On the one hand it is the ideal of the GOSPEL which dictates that

> . . . men must continue to condemn themselves not only for what they could, but also for their failure to perform what they could not, for their denial of the absolute good whose categorical demands were laid upon their incapable will.[82]

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[81] Ibid., pp. 4 f.

[82] Ibid., p. 5.

The church is to repent of its compromise with culture--even when that compromise was necessary. The ideal by which the church is to be measured is the impossible ideal of the gospel.

On the other hand, it is the ideal of repentance. Given the incapacity of the church to actualize its absolute demand, it nevertheless need not compound its perversity by way of hypocrisy. The church thus attains some measure of integrity by repentantly acknowledging its shortcomings, for in so doing, it embodies faith in the grace of God. This is the aim toward which Niebuhr directed the book, and it is by no means impossible to achieve.

But in the last three pages of the book, Niebuhr posits the reality of an AUTHENTIC church which CONFORMS to the demands of the Gospel and which "can save the churches from the ruin of their secularism and consequent division."[83] This "real" church thus poses a standard by which to measure the denominations.

Thus Niebuhr is somewhat imprecise in indicating the object of an internal view of the church, but he never departs from the conviction that the internal view provides the norm(s) by which the object of the external view can be evaluated.

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[83] Ibid., p. 283.

> It has often been pointed out that no ideal can be incorporated without the loss of some of its ideal character . . . and the gospel of Christ is especially subject to this sacrifice of character in the interest of organic embodiment; for the very essence of Christianity lies in the tension which it presupposes or creates between the worlds of nature and of spirit and in its resolution of that conflict by means of justifying faith. It demands the impossible in conduct and belief. . . . At the end, if not at the be beginning, of every effort to incorporate Christianity there is, therefore, a compromise. . . . The fact that compromise is inevitable does not make it less an evil. . . . But compromises are doubly evil when they are unacknowledged. . . .[84]

This method of relating the two views is a time-honored way of handling "the paradox or contradiction between what faith asserts about the church and what is evident to the unprejudiced eye.[85] It has the distinct merit of providing a sphere of competence for each field of analysis and of allowing them a complementary relationship despite their evident tensions. As another advocate of this position, Peter Berger, writes,

> By defining what the Church ought to be and already is as the Body of Christ, theology can provide the criteria by which the empirical reality can be evaluated. . . . [Yet] it is very important that theological articulation be accompanied by empirical perception. If the latter is absent . . . theological doctrine is misunderstood as a factual description--and thus, from being a criterion of judgment, the doctrine

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[84] Ibid., pp. 44.

[85] Claude Welch, The Reality of the Church (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), pp. 20f.

> becomes an instrument of rationalization. It is not enough, in other words, to have a doctrine of the Church. One must also have a sociology of the empirically existent churches. . . . The diagnosis without the doctrine may lead to resignation, which is bad, but the doctrine without the diagnosis almost certainly leads to illusion, which is much worse.[86]

It has the further merit of recognizing that the church is a WHOLE and that sociological language about the church was not restricted to remote adiaphora but was applicable to the entirety of the church's structure and functioning. This view, in short, recognizes the radicality of the problem faced by the confrontation of two divergent views of the church.

To succeed, however, this way of relating the two views must be clear about the content of the respective views, and we have found that Niebuhr in this work was ambiguous concerning the object of the internal view. On the one hand, it was an ideal impossible to embody; on the other, it was a reality resident within the social institutions.

The emergence of Niebuhr's reference to this AUTHENTIC church within the churches represents a significant shift in his thought and set him on a course he was to pursue throughout his life. For he recognized that the internal or theological view of the church does NOT

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[86] Peter Berger, op. cit., p. 121.

refer wholly to an ideal but also to a reality. It functions also descriptively and not just normatively. But once this shift is made, the question arises concerning WHAT is being described: whatever it is, it is manifestly different from the social institutions described by the external view. If the object of theology's view and that of sociology cannot be separated, neither can they be simply identified.

Niebuhr's external analysis of the church thus revealed the need for further clarification of his internal view and showed the need of developing a way of relating the two views that would account for that persisting fellowship of believers active in history.

This is the task he undertook in the 30's.

CHAPTER III

THE THIRTIES: INSTITUTION AND MOVEMENT

The second of Niebuhr's ways of conceiving the relationship between internal and external views of the church emerged in the 30's. Once again we will indicate the nature of this way and examine its context in Niebuhr's work, then examine the content of its respective views of the church, and finally assess its significance and adequacy.

A. Historical Context

We observed in the previous chapter that the internal and external views of the church were distinguished principally by their reference to different objects. During the 1930's Niebuhr maintained this position and worked to clarify the object of the internal view. The decade also saw him giving increasing attention to the perspective of the viewer, the issue which was to dominate his work in the 40's.

The way of relating internal and external views of the church predominant in the 30's thus depends once more on their reference to different objects, both of which are components of the church in its wholeness. Unlike his previous position, however, both of the

objects are REAL; one of them is not an ideal. One of the objects is the social institution; the other is the "authentic" church referred to in the closing pages of SSD. Much of Niebuhr's work in this decade aims at the identification and characterization of this dimension of the ecclesia. We shall identify this particular way--epitomized in Kingdom of God in America--as the way of INSTITUTION-MOVEMENT.

The external view of the church refers to the Christian social institution and the internal, to the movement of the People of God. The two views thus cannot conflict since they do not refer to the same reality. But neither can they be disjoined since the two realities are inseparably related in the whole church. They are thus complementary. Yet because of the way in which the two realities of the church are related, the internal view can perceive them both and the external, only one. Thus the internal view is the more inclusive.

We turn now to examine the emergence of this view in the context of Niebuhr's work.

Niebuhr describes his journey during the 30's as critical to his subsequent development.

> The 30's were for me as for many of my generation in the church the decisive period in the formation of basic personal convictions and in the establishment of theological formulations of those convictions.[1]

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[1]Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," loc. cit., p. 248.

While observing that he retained his methodological orientations (historism, religious empiricism, and neo-Kantian epistemology), he nevertheless describes this period as

> . . . the coming of fundamental religious convictions and theological orientations that makes me think of the years between 1930 and 1935 as the time in which I began to think the way I do now.[2]

Among those basic convictions were the sovereignty of God, the sinfulness of man, and the gift of faith.[3]

The reader of Niebuhr's essays in this period, however, will find no cataclysmic shift, but a gradual unfolding of themes and concerns already present earlier. As Hoedemaker observes,

> One who reads Niebuhr's works in chronological order will look in vain for a dramatic and sudden turning point; one sees rather, a gradual groping for answers and a gradual change of temper. The early 1930's were of crucial significance in this process, but they were more like rapids than like a new source.[4]

Hoedemaker proceeds to describe at length Niebuhr's critical appropriation of Barth's crisis motif as an expression of the central RELIGIOUS issue and Tillich's "beliefful realism" as an expression of

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[2] Ibid., p. 249.

[3] Ibid., pp. 248f.

[4] Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 17f.

an appropriate theological methodology.[5] Consistent theocentrism now informs Niebuhr's interpretation of history and his criticism of the subjectivization of value-theology.[6] Niebuhr's mentors in this period were Edwards, Pascal, Luther, Calvin, Thomas and Augustine.[7]

But Niebuhr's intellectual reorientation of the 30's needs also to be viewed in the context of his continuing concern for the church in its cultural milieux. That concern, so dominant in the 20's, continued without pause into the next decade.

Its shape, however, was different. One has only to compare "Christianity and the Social Problem"[8] in which Niebuhr is a staunch advocate of the social Gospel, with "The Christian Evangel and Social Culture"[9] in which Niebuhr advocates a turning away from concern with conserving Christian culture, in order to see the change which had taken place.

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[5] Ibid., pp. 21-27.

[6] Ibid., pp. 27-32; cf. also Frei, op. cit., pp. 40-53.

[7] Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," op. cit., p. 249.

[8] Loc. cit.

[9] H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Christian Evangel and Social Culture," Religion in Life, VIII (1939), pp. 44-49.

The change, however, does not involve a lessening of concern for social welfare. Rather, it involves a recognition of the relationship between social structure and human faith--that the former is the expression and not the molder of the latter.

Niebuhr indicates the basis of his shift in his article of 1936, "The Attack Upon the Social Gospel." He affirms the Social Gospel's interest in society as pertinent to the times, but criticizes the strategy advanced for pursuing social reform.

> From the neo-Protestant point of view the strategy of the Social Gospel rests upon a false analysis of the social situation, and the false strategy results from this false analysis. A true analysis will see that our social injustice and misery cannot be dealt with unless their sources in a false faith are dealt with. So long as the faith of man remains "capitalistic," that is, a faith in the security which can be given economically, so long the profit system and the system of private property cannot be budged. So long as any sort of this-worldly security remains the object of confidence our nationalisms and mammonisms will flourish. Both just and unjust live by faith, though by different kinds of faith, and our social no less than our individual lives are an expression of these faiths. From the neo-Protestant point of view repentance for the sins of social life is not enough; there needs to be repentance for the sin, for the false faith, for the idolatry which issues in all these sins. Men will be ready for no radically new life until they have really become aware of the falsity of the faith upon which their old life is based. But an attack upon faith requires the direct action of the Church rather than indirect action.[10]

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[10] Niebuhr, "The Attack Upon the Social Gospel," op. cit., p. 180.

The individualism of the Social Gospel has been superseded by the understanding of man as a social being whose social structures are embodiments of faith. Thus the sin of man lies, not in external institutions alone, but in the misdirected faith which they enshrine. This false faith is the target of the church's direct action. Precisely his social concern led Niebuhr to perceive the rootage of social evils in the basic values, loyalties and trusts of men. His concern with faith, then, is not a withdrawal from social concern but an intensification of it.

Already in 1930 Niebuhr perceived a fundamental resemblance between Communism and Capitalism. On the one hand, both proceeded from an alteration of religiously-supported agrarian lifestyles. On the other hand, both Communism and Capitalism depend on secular values.

> Secularism is both prerequisite to and consequence of capitalist production; it is also the prerequisite of communism and whether as capitalism or as communist secularism it is the real enemy of religion in the modern world.[11]

Both economic systems rely on the focusing of human energies and values on production and consumption of goods. Finally, Niebuhr claims that the ethics of love is equally foreign to both systems, for

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[11] H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Irreligion of Communist and Capitalist," Christian Century, XLVII (1930), p. 1307.

both depend on the conflict of social classes.[12] His conclusion from these observations is that Christianity must break its cultural captivity and again recognize its homelessness among the systems of men. The faith of these systems is basically inimical to the faith of Christianity.

Two years later, he played a variation on the same theme. In "Faith, Works, and Social Salvation" (1932) Niebuhr began with the assumption that

> Our political and economic schemes as well as worship reflect our religious attitudes.[13]

He finds in Fascism and Communism as well as in the problems of social control and long-range planning facing Americans a basically religious attitude which finds the ultimate force in history to be untrustworthy and places all its confidence in human reason.

> Fundamentally it is a religion of suspicion rather than of trust; its confidence in man's ability to master his fate is not so great as its assurance that there is no God who will work out humanity's salvation.[14]

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[12] Idem.

[13] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Faith, Works, and Social Salvation," Religion in Life, I (1932), p. 426.

[14] Ibid., p. 427.

The faith imperfectly expressed in liberalism is that of confidence in God as controller of history in a fashion beyond man's ability to control or to understand.

> . . . the final choice before men is not the choice between communism and democracy, but the choice between a rationalistic, engineering attitude toward life and a confident, trustful adjustment to a living universe.[15]

The precise social form of the Christian faith is not yet determined, but the immediate task is clear.

> The task of religious democracy may be defined in terms of liberation from the two great systems of self-interestedness which have fastened themselves upon us, nationalism and capitalism.[16]

Its basic confidence is in the divine agency at work in history for man's redemption.

But just as Niebuhr avoids any one-to-one identification of Christianity with particular social forms, so also does he oppose the too-simple rejection of particular forms as in themselves anti-Christian. Nationalism, socialism, internationalism and class loyalties may each embody Christian or non-Christian values. An effective strategy of life depends on accurate and careful analysis of

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[15] Ibid., p. 429.

[16] Ibid., pp. 429f.

the complex relationships between economic, patriotic, and religious forces.[17]

Thus during the 30's Niebuhr's social concern drove him to identify the faith-dimension of the social problem and to seek for the church an effective means of dealing with this dimension. Faith was no longer a matter of ideals but was incarnate in social structure. In the 20's he was advocate of social change, in the 30's, religious change. Yet the alteration here is one of strategy. He remained concerned about the structuring of society in a fashion that promoted human fulfillment through faith in God. With the depression in full swing at home, Hitler on the rise in Europe, and Japan flexing her muscles in the East, that concern was by no means abstract or other-worldly.

Nor was it humanistic or fideistic--it was thoroughly theocentric. The great perversion which Niebuhr perceived rampant was the one which identified or defined God with reference to "human wishes, desires or ideals without reference to a superhuman

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[17] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Nationalism, Socialism and Christianity," World Tomorrow, XVI (1933), p. 470.

reality."[18] Either ethical or aesthetic factors assumed priority and raised the question

> ". . . whether the values . . . in their totality and interrelation are equivalent to God, or require the postulate of a God, or offer the criteria by which the experience of God is to be distinguished from other experience.[19]

Niebuhr goes into great detail to demonstrate the scientific, religious and philosophical inadequacy of this line of thought. He also understands, however, that value-less theology quickly becomes legalistic and formalistic.[20]

His positive proposal is to understand values as relative without prejudice to their objectivity and as residing within an OBJECT as well as a subject. This means

> The true query of religion is, "Which among the available realities has the value of deity or has the potency of deity?" And this question turns into the other query, "Which reality has those characteristics which are the foundation of the value of deity, or which fulfill the human need for God?"[21]

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[18] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," The Nature of Religious Experiences: Essays in Honor of Douglas Clyde Macintosh, ed. comm.: J.S. Bixler, R.L. Calhoun, H.R. Niebuhr (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), p. 93.

[19] Ibid., p. 95.

[20] Ibid., p. 111.

[21] Ibid., p. 114.

That which fulfills the need, however, is something that values man--not necessarily POSITIVELY, but FINALLY. That one man is ultimately valued OR judged before is alone worthy of supreme value.[22]

This perspective clearly rejects the notion that the church is a promoter of human values, however humanitarian they might be. The church is not out to promote human fellowship, welfare or wisdom, however important these factors are. It is not the servant of man but of God and of man only as related to God.[23] Anything less than this is idolatry. Niebuhr thus speaks of the church's attack on false faiths as occurring on the objective level; the attack is no manipulation of subjectivity into attitudes of awe or warmth or piety. It is rather a witness to the valuing activity of being itself and therefore to its supreme valuableness for man.

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[22] The task of theology from this point of view lies then in the analysis of those characteristics by virtue of which a being has the value of deity for man, the examination of reasons for the failure of religions which attach themselves to beings which do not possess these characteristics adequately, and the description of the ultimate being, which as supremely real and the source of all other being, is alone able by virtue of its character to satisfy the human need for God. --Ibid., p. 116.

[23] Cf. ibid., pp. 109f.

The pursuit of these issues led Niebuhr away from specifically denominational concerns. He left Eden for a position at Yale in 1931, and his involvement with the problems of denominational Christianity temporarily abated. As Associate Professor of Christian ethics, however, his social concern increased. He traveled to Germany in 1932,[24] participated in Reinhold's Fellowship of Socialist Christians,[25] shared in the task of making Tillich's immigration to the U.S.A. possible, commented on the divisive controversy over pacifism within the Fellowship of Reconciliation[26] and wrote a commentary on the debate over intervention into the Sino-Japanese conflict.[27]

Nevertheless, his perspective was that of analyst rather than activist, a feature which distinguished him from his brother. Reinhold, immersed in the ambiguities of social process, acted; Richard, similarly immersed, thought. Their common teacher at Eden, Dr. Samuel Press

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[24] Hoedemaker, op. cit., p. xv.

[25] Bingham, op. cit., p. 157.

[26] H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Inconsistency of the Majority," World Tomorrow, XVII (1934), pp. 43 f.

[27] H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Grace of Doing Nothing," The Christian Century, XLIX (1932), pp. 378-380.

> . . . once distinguished between Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr by saying that if an organization was doing one good thing Reinhold would join it and Richard would not.[28]

Between the brothers' style of social involvement, however, there lay a basic theological difference which Richard locates in their only published debate.[29]

> The fundamental question seems to me to be whether "the history of mankind is a perennial tragedy" which can derive meaning only from a goal which lies beyond history as my brother maintains, or whether the "eschatological" faith to which I seek to adhere, is justifiable.[30]

This reference to an "eschatological" faith represents a shift from Niebuhr's earlier references to the Gospel as "ideals" impossible to embody. It emerges from his new concentration on divine sovereignty: that sovereignty included the sovereignty of God over the course of history, and this meant for Niebuhr that the process at work in history is trustworthy. History and man might be fallen and sinful, but the Sovereign One ultimately in control of man and history is good. Neither man nor history is beyond the rule of this One,

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[28]Bingham, op. cit., p. 205.

[29]Niebuhr, "The Grace of Doing Nothing," op. cit. Critique by Reinhold Niebuhr, "Must We Do Nothing?" ibid., pp. 415-417. Reply by H. Richard Niebuhr, "A Communication: The Only Way into the Kingdom of God," ibid., p. 447.

[30]Niebuhr, "A Communication: The Only Way into the Kingdom of God," loc. cit., p. 447.

Niebuhr's "eschatological" faith is thus a confidence in the God of history.

The "ideal-real" schema of his earlier works reflected an awareness of the tension between the Gospel and the activities of men, that is, it acknowledged human sin. But in so separating the two realms, it had the effect of giving sin sovereignty over man's history. Reference to "eschatological" faith overcomes this dualism by positing the immanence of divine rule and locates the observable tension in man's refusal to acknowledge this sovereignty. And even this refusal, which is the epitome of sin, is being overcome by the divine activity. What Niebuhr had once said to be in the realm of ideals, he now found to be in the realm of REALITY, although it be a reality which is EMERGING and not yet finished. Nevertheless this reality provides the basis for a confidence that at times allows one "the grace of doing nothing."[31]

Thus Niebuhr approached the social problems of the 30's with the compassion of a sensitive man acutely aware of innocent suffering bu: with the equanimity of one whose center of value is the One who is active in history. His concern--his SOCIAL concern--

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[31] Cf. idem.

during the 30's was with the faith which produces works, and with the church which witnesses to that faith.

B. The Church

In conjunction with his move away from the dualism implicit in an "ideal-real" distinction towards emphasis on the immanence of the divine sovereignty, Niebuhr developed a dynamic conception of the church in which its two aspects were set squarely within the realm of history and inseparably related.

Niebuhr's two contributions to the symposium The Church Against the World reflects this transition, and his second book, The Kingdom of God in America, sets forth the nature of the historical movement which is the church. In the former, Niebuhr first acknowledges the accuracy of the charges of accommodation leveled against the church by its external critics--and by himself in SSD--, then he re-examined those charges in light of the church's faith in divine sovereignty, and finally, he posits a dynamic view of the church which accounts for its ability to respond actively to its plight. In the latter work, Niebuhr further developed this dynamic conception of the church by analyzing its nature and tracing its course through United States history.

We will examine each in turn in order to observe both the development of Niebuhr's thought and his insight into the nature of the church.

In his introductory remarks to The Church Against the World, Niebuhr observes that

> The point of view is from within the church, is that of men who, having been born into the Christian community, having been nurtured in it and having been convinced of the truth of its gospel, know no life apart from it.[32]

This perspective is capable of dialogue with external critics of the church, but the two viewpoints interpret the phenomena differently. External critics

> . . . seem to criticize the church by reference to some standard which is not the church's but that of civilization or the world. . . . They demand that it become a savior, while the church has always known that it is not a savior but the company of those who have found a savior.[33]

Nevertheless Niebuhr maintains that the external critics must be heard and heeded, but must not be accepted as finally decisive. The internal view Niebuhr wishes to maintain "will expect him (God) to

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[32]H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Question of the Church," The Church Against the World, ed. H. Richard Niebuhr, Wilhelm Pauck, Francis P. Miller (New York and Chicago: Willett, Clark & Co., 1935), p. 1.

[33]Ibid., p. 3.

use as instruments of his judgment the opponents and critics of Christianity."[34] This is a definite precursor of the perspectivism which characterizes Niebuhr's work in the 40's, and we will return to it later.

Criticisms of the church voiced by some of its external observers charge the church with capitulation to social injustices in its institutional operation. Such epithets as impotent savior of civilization, ally of oppression, sanctifier of nationalism, collaborator with capitalism, and maladjusted institution have all been hurled at the church.[35] Niebuhr admits the validity of the charges, but states that they spring from criteria foreign to the church, criteria more humanistic than theistic.

Another set of criticisms of the church emerges when examined in light of its own criteria. Niebuhr summarizes them in his essay "Towards the Independence of the Church" and finds them charging the church with bondage to capitalism, nationalism and anthropocentrism.

> The entanglement with capitalism appears in the great economic interests of the church in its debt structures, in its dependence through endowments upon the continued dividends of capitalism and especially in its

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[34] Idem.

[35] Ibid., pp. 3-10.

> dependence upon the continued gifts of the privileged classes in the economic society. This entanglement has become the greater the more the church has attempted to keep pace with the development of capitalistic civilization, not without compromising with capitalist ideas of success and efficiency.[36]

Bondage to nationalism shows up in

> . . . the confusion of democracy with the Christian ideal of life in America, of racialism and the gospel in Germany, of Western nationalism and church mission in the Orient. . . . The churches have encouraged the nations to regard themselves as messianic powers and have supplied them with religious excuses for their imperialist expansions and aggressions. And in every time of crisis it has been possible for nationalism to convert the major part of the church.[37]

Bondage to anthropocentrism assumes its most dangerous form when the church substitutes religion itself for the object of religion.

> Man's aspiration after God, his prayer, his worship was exalted in this syncretism into a saving power, worthy of a place alongside science and art. Religion was endowed with all the attributes of Godhead, the while its basis was found in human nature itself.[38]

The church so bound has adopted the standards of civilization as its own and has measured its situation by spurious criteria.

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[36] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Towards the Independence of the Church," ibid., pp. 131f. Cf. "The Irreligion of Communist and Capitalist," loc. cit.

[37] Niebuhr, "Towards the Independence of the Church," op. cit., p. 135.

[38] Ibid., p. 138.

> It is a church which has lost the distinctive note and the earnestness of a Christian discipline of life and has become what every religious institution tends to become--the teacher of the prevailing code of morals and the pantheon of the social gods. It is a church, moreover, which has become entangled with the world in its desire for the increase of its power and prestige and which shares the worldly fear of insecurity.[39]

But the church which has bound itself to the world finds itself in the hands of a fickle master. There is widespread revolt against the church at the hands of the intellectuals and the disinherited. The former perceive the sham of empty dogmatism and shallow sentimentalism; the latter "protest against it as the ally of capitalist, racial or nationalist imperialism."[40] These attacks, however, increase the church's dependence rather than assist its independence.[41] Furthermore the church may remain bound to worldliness even while carrying on a revolt against it. Forming alliances with alien revolutionary movements very often amounts to becoming merely "the religious institution of a revolting society, serving the

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[39] Ibid., pp. 138f.

[40] Ibid., p. 140.

[41] Ibid., pp. 140f.

interests of the society in the same way that a capitalist church serves a capitalist society."[42]

How does the serious churchman respond to these attacks from within and from without? First he must note that the judgment on the church as perceived from outside is different from that perceived within the community. The data is the same, but the interpretation given the data is different because of differing standards by which it is measured.

The judgment on the accommodation of the church is not that of social dysfunctionality; within the church, the judgment is the judgment of GOD for apostasy, idolatry and lust.[43]

Only one question arises for churchmen in a church so judged: "What must we do to be saved?"[44] This cry arises from a keen sense of futility in ministering to the world. The church finds

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[42] Ibid., p. 147. The obviously Marxian tinge to many of the above criticisms of the church should not suggest that Niebuhr agreed with the Marxian analysis, or that he was interested in defending capitalism or communism. In fact he found them alike in their economic reductionism and in their desire to use the work of religion to further extraneous purposes. Cf. "The Irreligion of Communist and Capitalist," loc. cit., and "Towards the Independence of the Church," op. cit., p. 130, n. 1.

[43] Niebuhr, "Towards the Independence of the Church," op. cit., pp. 125 f.

[44] Niebuhr, "The Question of the Church," ibid., p. 2.

itself under the judgment of God as a finite, weak and sinful body, and in THIS context it cries out for salvation,[45] NOT, however, salvation of its LIFE, but of its SOUL. For it perceives that it has sold that soul to a corrupt and corrupting civilization.

"Towards the Independence of the Church" is Niebuhr's clarion call for recovery of the church's distinct essence and mission, a call for the church to recover its authentic faith and to resume its rightful posture as "a revolutionary community in a pre-revolutionary society. Its main task always remains that of understanding, proclaiming and preparing for the divine revolution in human life."[46]

Niebuhr first observes that the church is dynamic and lives in a rhythm of penetration and withdrawal vis à vis society. Withdrawal is to become reconverted to God from the corruption of culture for the sake of a new aggression into culture.[47] Faith in the sovereign God demands this dialectical movement, for the God of culture is not one of culture's gods. The cultural faiths of capitalism, nationalism and anthropocentrism so pervade the church, despite its direct opposition and clear alternatives to these faiths, that sometimes it

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[45] Ibid., pp. 7ff.

[46] Niebuhr, "Towards the Independence of the Church," op. cit., p. 154.

[47] Ibid., p. 123.

must withdraw. A revolt against "worldliness" is at hand, and it comes from churchmen loyal "to the essential institution while they protest against its corrupted forms."[48]

Niebuhr then issues a series of timely warnings for the revolutionaries: first, they must not identify the evil with the evil-doers;[49] secondly, they must avoid alliance with groups having different aims;[50] third, they must avoid relapse into familiar worldliness.[51] The revolt of the church must go on independently[52] in order to accomplish something other than simply a new cultural captivity.

But the church, in re-affirming its own distinctiveness, cannot "trust itself to play a messianic role in the deliverance of mankind." Complete independence and self-sufficiency are illusions.

> 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. Otherwise the emancipation of the church from the world is impossible; there is no motive for it nor any meaning in it. There is no

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[48] Ibid., p. 141.

[49] Ibid., p. 142.

[50] Ibid., pp. 143 f. This was an approach markedly different from that of Reinhold!

[51] Ibid., pp. 147 f.

[52] Ibid., p. 148.

> flight out of the captivity of the church save into the captivity of God. . . . It remains true that loyalty to the "I am that I am" is the only reason for the church's existence and that the recovery of this loyalty is the beginning of true emancipation.[53]

That which distinguishes the church is its faith in the one God, and reassertion of its uniqueness begins with a staunch re-affirmation of its faith, which involves movement towards God and away from cultural captivity.

But no such recovery of faith can come about without intellectual clarity:

> Without a Christian theory or theology the Christian movement must lose itself in emotions and sentiments or hasten to action which will be premature and futile because it is not based upon a clear analysis of the situation . . . . years spent in libraries and in study are not necessarily wasted years, but years of activity without knowledge are lost years indeed.[54]

The recovery of faith depends heavily on clarifying man's relationship to God and to his fellow man in the context of God's rule. Man seen in isolation from this context, as in psychology or sociology, is man inadequately understood.

Niebuhr finds one more thing necessary to loose the church from its bondage: maintenance of the tension between "this-

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[53] Ibid., pp. 149f., italics added.

[54] Ibid., p. 153.

worldliness" and "other-worldliness." This tension insures the continuation of its dynamic character. Exclusive emphasis on either dimension distorts the character of the church as a revolutionary body.

> How to be in the world and yet not of the world has always been the problem of the church. It is a revolutionary community in a pre-revolutionary society. Its main task always remains that of understanding, proclaiming and preparing for the divine revolution in human life. Nevertheless, there remains the necessity of participation in the affairs of an unconverted and unreborn world.[55]

This tension remains unresolved and a problem for the church seeking independence. The outcome of this search cannot be anticipated: only the demands of the present are clear. And, whereas no tactical plans are on hand, Niebuhr holds

> . . . that the repentance and faith working in the rank and file of the church are the preconditions of its independence and renewal.[56]

This, then, represents Niebuhr's thorough analysis of the church in the mid-30's. He differs from SSD in suggesting that its cultural captivity is unnecessary, indeed, in calling for re-assertion of its dynamic character which exhibits its independence of culture--in other words, in calling for an increase of that "authentic" church which is a human possibility.

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[55] Ibid., pp. 154f., italics added.

[56] Ibid., p. 156.

In his review of The Church Against the World, Willard Sperry offers a cogent criticism of what he considers as Niebuhr's repristinization theme:

> Granted that American Protestantism has become too much colored by the clay with which it works . . . has there ever existed or can there exist a church which does not strike its roots into the homely daily life of a people, its culture and its civilization. . . . I cannot help thinking that the conception of Christianity in these essays departs too far from the analogy of the leaven and the lump in the direction of conformity to some definitive external schematization.[57]

He thus casts doubt on the reality of a purified church and thus on the feasibility of Niebuhr's proposal for withdrawal.

The time was right for a clarification of the dynamic church in culture. This was the issue with which he dealt in The Kingdom of God in America.

Once more Niebuhr identifies his viewpoint as INTERNAL. In fact, his announced purpose in writing was to supplement the one-sided presentation given in SSD, where the church was considered primarily as a passive social institution.

> Christianity . . . must be understood as a movement rather than as an institution or series of institutions. . . . it is more dynamic than static . . . . the true church is not an organization but the organic movement of those who have been "called out" and "sent."

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[57]Willard L. Sperry, "The Babylonian Captivity of American Protestantism," Christendom, I (1935-36), p. 369.

> Institutionalized Christianity as it appears in denominations as well as in state churches, in liberal programs as well as in conservative creeds, is only a halting place between Christian movements.[58]

Thus he characterizes that "authentic" church as dynamic and insists that as such, it can only be understood rightly when its own perceptions of its aims and objects are at least provisionally adopted.[59]

One way of analyzing the church regards it as a secondary function of economic or social history,[60] and such an analysis yields much insight into the functioning of religion in America. But there is more. As Bergson observes, a creative, dynamic and aggressive faith exists which alone accounts for the pervasive force of the church.

> . . . because the sociological interpretation deals with static or passive rather than with dynamic Christianity in America it is unsatisfactory as a complete explanation.[61]

Thus in this work, Niebuhr regarded the external view of the church to be directed towards the static religious institution and the

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[58] H. Richard Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937; Harper Torchbook edition, 1959), pp. xiii f.

[59] Cf. ibid., pp. 12 ff.

[60] Ibid., pp. 4 f.

[61] Ibid., p. 12.

internal, towards the dynamic and organic elements of the church's life.[62] The emphasis of this work is on the church as Christian movement.

The GOAL of this movement is the transcendent One beyond every particular manifestation. But service of the transcendent God implies that this movement

> . . . cannot be represented in terms of simple progress in either an otherworldly or a this-worldly direction, nor can it be stated in terms of dualism, which always implies a static view. The relation of God to the world . . . requires of those who seek to be obedient to the divine imperative a dialectical movement. This dialectic is expressed in worship and in work, in the direction toward God and the direction toward the world which is loved in God, in the pilgrimage toward the eternal kingdom and in the desire to make his will real on earth.[63]

Furthermore this dialectic cannot be synthesized save by God alone. Each particular stage of the movement remains particular and partial and derives its significance solely from participation in the invisible catholic church, the whole Christian movement in time and space.[64]

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[62] Cf. Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 38f.

[63] Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America, op. cit., pp. xivf.

[64] Ibid., p. xv.

The social impact of this movement has been complex. That dialectic movement, particularly as it appeared in American Protestantism, has been animated by a perception of the immediate reign of God and the consequent subordination of every human movement and institution. This faith placed societal construction in a quandry.

For

> . . . no human plan or organization could be identified with the universal kingdom since every such plan was product of a relative, self-interested and therefore corrupted reason.[65]

Yet one could not withdraw from worldly concerns, for faith in the Kingdom of God involved a vivid sense of immanence:

> . . . for Protestants the sense of catastrophe and newness of life gave urgency to the idea of the kingdom of God; it was necessary to press into it, for the time was short; the great revolution which would make all things new was no longer a dim dream and a mere culmination of ordinary life, but it was near and it was a threat as much as a promise.[66]

The dilemma posed by the faith arose from its conviction of the relativity and corruption of all human efforts and its restless demand for persons to act immediately in responsibility to God.[67] On the one

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[65] Ibid., p. 23.

[66] Ibid., p. 27.

[67] Ibid., p. 30.

hand it demanded and on the other it relativized human acts of social construction. This faith was an excellent basis for critical work, but its constructive force was much less in the areas of morality, politics, economics and religion.[68] The church

> . . . had even less right to claim absolute authority than had the secular powers, since it was the foundation of Jesus who had emptied himself and made himself of no reputation and had taken upon himself the form of a servant. . . . Nevertheless the religious life needed to be organized. . . .[69]

The church, then, is a dialectical movement towards the transcendent One,

> . . . not a structure but a life, a movement which would never come to rest again in secure habitation, but needed to go on and on from camp to camp to its meeting with the ever-coming kingdom.[70]

Because that One towards whom it moves alone is absolute, the church is of utter but penultimate significance.

In this work Niebuhr traces the way in which the dialectical movement has manifested itself in American history exerting various kinds of influence on that history. The movement has been through three phases guided respectively by consciousness of (1) the divine

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[68] Ibid., pp. 31 ff.

[69] Ibid., p. 33.

[70] Ibid., p. 44.

sovereignty, (2) the kingdom of Christ, and (3) the coming kingdom. Here we will briefly indicate the dimensions of those phases as they illumine the church. Our aim in examining these historical periods is to gain clarity concerning the Christian movement which Niebuhr regards as the "real" church.

Under the perception of the sovereignty of God, the up-building of the church assumed top priority.

> For what is the church save the assembly of people before God or the movement of those who, abandoning all relative and finite goals, turn toward the infinite end of life? 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.[71]

Building the church meant giving that movement social expression.[72]

In the first instance, that movement involved disentanglement from political or economic--or ecclesiastical--institutions; but it further involved efforts to exclude persons not of the elect from membership.[73] Its earnest attempt was to avoid service of any

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[71] Ibid., p. 67; cf. p. 69.

[72] Ibid., p. 69.

[73] Ibid., pp. 70 f.

master save God alone, and most particularly, to avoid usurpation of the divine prerogative itself.[74]

But secondly, that movement entailed service to and engagement in the world.[75] This dimension expressed itself in various ways, but in every case involved the following through of an awareness of God's relation to the world;[76] it sought to obey the one who was active in history.

From the Great Awakening to the Civil War, however, a different perception of divine rule emerged. Niebuhr indicates that this period was dominated by the idea of regeneration, the possibility of new life in Christ.[77] This was not to be separated from the sovereignty of God but rather represented a different emphasis.[78] The impact on the church of this new perception again expressed the basic dialectic.

In the first place, the church--the TRUE church--was invisible and

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[74] Ibid., p. 71.

[75] Ibid., pp. 72 f.

[76] Ibid., p. 73.

[77] Ibid., pp. 100 f.

[78] Ibid., pp. 101 ff.

> . . . made up of those who had become members of the kingdom of Christ and the visible church was to imitate as best it might both the purity and the freedom of the invisible. The church was to be the church of free men in Christ.[79]

The revivals sought to involve men in the invisible church thus to loose them from entanglements with the world and present them with direct experiential knowledge of God.[80] The possibility they proclaimed was new life in Christ,

> . . . love [of] the "Enemy" who seemed to destroy all his creatures but now is shown to be seeking their redemption.[81]

The new life consisted in love for God based on his goodness and a consequent sacramental sense of all existence.[82]

A new withdrawal from social and political alliances followed this movement and issued in the foundation of new societies and in purification of the old.[83]

> It did not identify the visible with the invisible church, but it was determined that the visible should try to image the invisible.[84]

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[79] Ibid., p. 97.

[80] Ibid., p. 110.

[81] Ibid., p. 116.

[82] Idem.

[83] Ibid., p. 120.

[84] Idem.

But that movement was not simply one of withdrawal, but of "intra-worldly loyalty to the kingdom of God."[85] Life in Christ was a life of love of neighbor in God. And works of penetration into the secular realm were prominent, particularly with respect to education and the slavery question.[86]

The 19th century witnessed the emergence of the third dimension of the kingdom of God--the coming kingdom--into prominence as the dominant theme in American Christianity.[87] This was, according to Niebuhr, the time of eschatological anticipation and its impact on the church once more expressed the basic dialectic.

But this time the movement began in intensified penetration into the affairs of the world. The revival had signaled the coming victory of the spirit of Christ on earth, and

> Christ's spirit demands the abolition of war and slavery, the practice of philanthropy and the government of all life by reference to the dignity and worth of men.[88]

The missionary movement and the emerging Social Gospel further evidence the dynamic of worldly penetration which resulted from

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[85] Ibid., p. 119.

[86] Ibid., pp. 121f.

[87] Ibid., p. 150.

[88] Ibid., p. 153.

anticipation of God's Kingdom appearing concretely on earth.[89]

Nevertheless the other dynamic was present. For the millenialists

> . . . had little faith in progress toward a true peace by any means save those of the Christian revolution. At the same time their confidence in the gospel was so great that they were not tempted to attach it to the chariots of secular parties.[90]

In the revival, conversion of the individual life was primary. It amounted to a change in the aim of one's life away from self towards God.[91] The result of this change was the disinterested benevolence that marked the period.

Up to this point, Niebuhr has described the church as dialectical movement given impetus by its perception of the Kingdom of God. Throughout the stress has been on the "authentic" church, to use our term, i.e., the movement of the people of God.

But there is another process also at work, a process of entropy, a move towards solidification ard fixation of the movement. In his "introduction" Niebuhr cited Bergson's distinction between

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[89] Ibid., pp. 158-161.

[90] Ibid., p. 150.

[91] Ibid., p. 156.

static and dynamic religion in his justification for concentrating on the latter.[92] In his concluding chapter Niebuhr returns to Bergson for help in accounting for that sizeable element of American religion which is NOT "wholly describable in terms of movement."[93]

The process which accounts for static and passive religion is the process of INSTITUTIONALIZATION. For Niebuhr, who revises many of Bergson's emphases while yet using his basic framework, institutionalism consists in the crystallization, brought about by a process of cooling, of what prophetism had poured white hot into the social life of man.[94] It seems to be a universal process which is an inevitable qualification of the church as dynamic movement of the people of God.

But the qualification is by no means wholly negative.

> On the one hand they [institutions] are genuine efforts to conserve for post-revolutionary generations the gains made by a revolutionary movement. Without such stabilization and conservation the great movements would have passed like storms at sea leaving behind them nothing but the wreckage of the earlier establishments they had destroyed.[95]

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[92] Ibid., pp. 11 f.

[93] Ibid., pp. 165 f.

[94] Idem.

[95] Ibid., p. 167.

Attributing positive significance to the static, passive and defensive organization of religion represents a shift in Niebuhr's thought from his earlier criticisms. Yet the shift is by no means a negation of his previous judgments, for an institution by its very nature

> . . . is static whereas its parent movement had been dynamic; it confines men within its limits while the movement had liberated them from the bondage of institutions; it looks to the past, the movement had pointed forward. Though in content the institution resembles the dynamic epoch whence it proceeded, in spirit it is like the state before the revolution.[96]

In short, "Institutions can never conserve without betraying the movements from which they proceed."[97] Their spirit lacks the vitality capable of producing spontaneity and creativity; their orientation is toward the past rather than the future; and they lose the reference of the symbolic forms they had taken such pains to create.[98] Nevertheless the institutions, by the very fact of their perversions, generate the discontent which launches the movement on to its next phase.[99]

The church for Niebuhr, then, is both institution and movement; indeed, the two are seen as parts of a dialectical process through which the Kingdom of God is served in history. And service

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[96] Ibid., p. 168.

[97] Idem.

[98] Ibid., pp. 168f.

[99] Ibid., p. 198.

of that kingdom is the sole raison d'etre of the church. Its shape is subordinate to its task, and that task is not the service of man but of God.

C. The Two Views of the Church

In both the works examined above, Niebuhr advocates a conjunction of internal and external views of the church. The two views refer to two different dimensions of the whole church; thus, since their objects differ, they cannot conflict. Yet because these two dimensions are intimately related as phases within the overall movement, they cannot be separated. But neither are they equally significant.

Once the Bergsonian distinction between static and dynamic Christianity is admitted, views of the static dimension alone become peculiarly deficient.

> The analysis of religious life which makes only the institution its object and leaves the movement out of account remains very partial and, moreover cannot do full justice to the institution since this developed out of the movement. Because the sociological interpretation deals with static or passive rather than with dynamic Christianity in America it is unsatisfactory as a complete explanation.[100]

The dynamic creativity out of which institutions spring is simply

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[100] Ibid., p. 12, italics added.

unaccounted for solely by reference to social factors: they determine the form but not the force of institutions.[101] Thus external views of the church are not only incomplete but also misleading when taken alone.

The same is not the case with the internal view which has as its object the "organic movement of those who have been 'called out' and 'sent.'"[102] For examination of this movement has as a part of itself the impulse towards institutions and thus permits within itself examination of the processes of social accommodation attendant on institutionalization. It is thus a more inclusive view capable of taking into itself and transforming the significance of the external view.

The significance of this way of relating the two views--the way of institution/movement--may be illumined by contrasting it with the ideal/real schema analyzed in the previous chapter.

Niebuhr himself suggested that Social Sources of Denominationalism "left me dissatisfied at a number of points"[103] and that the analysis offered in Kingdom of God in America started at an opposite point--with American Christianity rather than with

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[101] Ibid., pp. ix f.

[102] Ibid., p. xiv.

[103] Ibid., p. ix.

American Culture.[104] Critics have found the point of difference between the two works a matter of debate when considering methodology alone. Frei pointed to a sharp "dichotomy between scientific-external and normative, personal or valuing viewpoints" advocated in Meaning of Revelation but not followed in KGA.[105] Hoedemaker, on the other hand, observes

> No contrast or change can be construed between a "sociological" method of The Social Sources and a "theological" method of The Kingdom of God. . . .[106]

Methodologically the two works are similar although the method of KGA includes intangible ideals and beliefs and rejects the dogma of social determinism.[107]

Hoedemaker is correct in finding the basic difference between the works to reside elsewhere than in historical method. He points to its locus in the rejection of the ideal/real schema.

> No longer does Niebuhr see the social conditioning of church and religion as a given and, as such, deplorable situation. . . . social conditioning is seen as

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[104] Ibid., p. 14. Cf. Hoedemaker, op. cit., p. 38, especially n. 24.

[105] Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background," op. cit., pp. 30f. The dichotomy is presumably operative in The Social Sources. . . .

[106] Hoedemaker, op. cit., p. 38.

[107] Cf. Ibid., p. 39.

> something that happens, that takes place as a movement in which faith is expressed. The forms in which we encounter church and religion are not in the first place incarnations of ideals, but rather expressions of a movement.[108]

We would agree with Hoedemaker's assessment and elaborate on it at two points. Both stem from the observation that Niebuhr's first two books concur in regarding internal and external views of the church to observe different objects.

Niebuhr's earlier work had as its object the religious institution and regarded it in its passive relation to culture. He considered this an external or sociological view. His later work focused on the Christian movement and concentrated on its active relation to American society. This, he regarded as an internal view.

Secondly, Niebuhr's earlier work assumed that the religious institution was bearer of the Christian ideal and container of the "authentic" church. By implication, then, the view which analyzed that institution--the external view--was inclusive of the other. In fact Niebuhr periodically refers to the determinative influence of social forces on such non-institutional elements of the church as doctrine, liturgy and theology.[109] He does NOT suggest that

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[108] Ibid., pp. 39f., italics his.

[109] Niebuhr, The Social Sources . . ., op. cit., pp. 17f.

sociological factors wholly account for the church; he acknowledges the importance of religious factors, but he adds

> . . . an exclusively religious interpretation, especially a doctrinal one, is likely to miss the point of the whole development even more completely than does an exclusively economic explanation.[110]

THIS conviction indeed underwent a "Copernican Revolution" between the two works.

For in KGA, the social institution is NOT the inclusive church containing within itself a core of true believers. That "core" or better, that historical movement of the faithful is the inclusive reality which contains religious institutions as one phase of itself. Thus that view which refers to the Christian movement, i.e., the theological view, is the more inclusive because it necessarily includes reference to that phase of the movement which gives rise to institutions.

Thus there is indeed a major shift between the two works--not in their method, perhaps, but in the concept of the object viewed and in the way of relating the two views of the church.

The way advocated in KGA has overcome the major difficulties of SSD, namely (1) the obligatory force of an impossible ideal, and (2) the unspecified nature of the authentic church. First, the

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[110] Ibid., p. 27, italics mine.

religious institution does indeed accommodate itself to culture necessarily, but this necessity is not rejected as sinful but accorded positive status as a phase in the whole of the Christian movement. Thus necessity for institutional reform and the locus of a critical stance is retained without recourse to an idealism that makes any reform ultimately futile. Secondly, the authentic church is no longer conceived as residing exclusively within the religious institutions but now exists as that movement of response to God which brings forth institutions.

Further advantages of this view may be mentioned. First, it clearly accounts for the apparent contradiction in language about the church coming from theology and sociology. "Contradictory" statements refer to different realities both of which are included in the church. This allows sociology free reign in its sphere of concern (which Niebuhr carefully delineated) and avoids the need for defensiveness or protection against its findings on the part of theology. This in turn has permitted the disclosure of the amazing complexity of religious organizations--their multiplicity of ancestry, their cultural adaptability, their propensities towards perversion and their witness to the faith.

Furthermore this view has permitted theology free reign in developing ITS insights into the church using its traditional categories

such as "people of God," "Body of Christ," and "One, holy, catholic and apostolic" without needing to defend its assertions against the findings of sociology.

Also, the insistence that the two realities are intimately related lends appreciation for particular organizations without loss of a critical perspective towards them. In this schema, one may view them with the dialectic of radical monotheism. One cannot simply write off ecclesiastical institutions in Manichean fashion when one recognizes their source in the Christian movement; nor can one lose his soul to them since they are only instruments of that movement. This is the perspective towards the church which Niebuhr consistently advocated for the rest of his life.

Finally a helpful insight comes in Niebuhr's use of the dimension of movement as the INCLUSIVE reality. Alternative positions have considered the "authentic" church to reside "within" the ecclesiastical institution and have attributed inclusiveness to the external view; these notions suggest that the "real" church may be seen by "the eyes of faith." But that view posits a distinction between members of the religious institutions--some are outside the "real" church although in the "visible" church. Yet no one is quite sure enough of his own status to be able to discern who is where; thus the whole schema is unhelpful: it sows dissension within the church and

uncharity towards those who are outside the religious institution. Niebuhr reversed this idea. For him the religious societies exist as parts of a much more inclusive whole--as those parts charged with the responsibility of building up that whole. The whole is the dynamic movement of persons responding to God. The ecclesiastical institution is composed of those whose task it is to serve this movement. And there is no longer any point to making distinctions concerning the quality of participants in this service. Some may be "luke warm" and others "red hot," but this has to do with their participation in the organization and NOT with their participation in or work for the movement. Furthermore, pride in religious organization is excluded in principle and mission becomes a matter of witness, not to oneself or to one's group, but to the greater reality to which one and his group responds.

There are, however, several issues left unresolved in this schema. First, the significance of the viewpoint of the writer has become apparent. With Niebuhr's conception of the church as a dialectic movement which includes institutions as one phase of itself, the church now appears as ONE reality. As a movement it includes several phases, but they are all inseparably related. The more static conception allows for views to consider different objects, for those objects "keep still"; but now those objects merge in a dynamic

interaction, and it no longer seems helpful to suggest that a view could perceive one alone. Nevertheless there ARE accounts of the religious institution and others of the dynamic church. And since they cannot be dismissed and cannot be accounted for in terms of the separability of objects, they must have to do with the perspective of the viewer. What, then, makes one viewer perceive a limited dimension of the church and another, a wider? What constitutes a writer's viewpoint, and how does this effect one's perception?

Secondly, what identifies the movement about which Niebuhr speaks? If it is not limited to the Christian religious organizations, what are the marks by which it may be known?

Thirdly, who are the "movers" that comprise the church? Must one define the "authentic" church simply by reference to its function, or can something also be said concerning its composition?

These are some of the issues which occupied Niebuhr's attention as he reflected on the church during the 1940's.

The 30's witnessed faith in economic systems appearing as futile and faith in nation or class or race, as demonic. The only faith capable of sustaining life in this situation was faith in God, the mysterious abyss, and propagation of this faith was the business of the church. But effective pursuit of this task made a churchly withdrawal

from its secular bondages necessary. The institution/movement schema of understanding the dimensions of the church showed that withdrawal to be possible.

CHAPTER IV

THE FORTIES: INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL VIEWS

In the 1940's Niebuhr shifts directions in his efforts to articulate the relationship between two views of the church from emphasis on the object viewed to focus on the subject viewing. It is the way of two perspectives. According to this way of relating the two, there is one complex object of investigation--the church--and the viewer sees it from two different viewpoints, one "outside" or external to the church and the other, "within" or internal to it. Thus the relationship between the views depends on how the perspectives are related, and Niebuhr finds them NOT incompatible or mutually exclusive. The internal viewpoint refers beyond the church to the God on whom all being depends, and reference to THIS one demands the inclusion of external viewpoints making of them "events of spiritual significance."[1] The data of external views are accepted and RECONTEXTUALIZED so that their significance-in-relation-to-God is apparent. The internal view of the church is thus inclusive of the

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[1] H. Richard Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941; Paperback edition, 1962), p. 84.

external. In principle, it is a WHOLLY inclusive view capable of receiving and transforming ALL wisdom about the church. In practice,, however, the internal viewpoint is limited by human finitude; nevertheless it maintains a principled openness to insight, whatever its source. For that insight is partial and relative; but in relation to the Absolute, it is good.

Niebuhr articulated this "way" in the early 40's, principally in The Meaning of Revelation. But its application to the analysis of the church occurred gradually in the latter half of the decade, and soon gave way to the motif of CONVERSION prominent in the 1950's.

We will investigate first, the historical context of the 1940's in which this way emerged, second, the content of some of Niebuhr's writings about the church in this decade, and third, the perspectivism of Niebuhr and its significance for answering the question of the relationship between two divergent views of the church.

A. Historical Context

In the 20's Niebuhr's concern for social reform led him to concentrate on the role of the religious institution in culture. In the 30's with his new emphasis on divine sovereignty, he found social problems rooted in the fundamental faiths of men, and spoke of the need for the church to be understood as a dialectical movement of the

faithful. In the 40's Niebuhr pursued this course a step further and inquired into the influence of a person's faith on his perception and his behavior. Pursuit of that inquiry gave him new insight into the unity, community and identity of the church and ultimately led him to locate the difference between views of the church not only in the subjective standpoint of the viewer but also in the context within which the object is interpreted.

Niebuhr himself spoke of the theological situation during his lifetime as shifting in a pendulum-like fashion:

> I believe that the Barthian correction of the line of march begun in Schleiermacher's day was absolutely essential, but that it has become an overcorrection and that Protestant theology can minister to the church's life more effectively if it resumes the general line of march represented by the evangelical, empirical and critical movement.[2]

Niebuhr's own theological "journey" follows this path. And if that path be likened to a pendulum swing, then the 40's represents the pause between the movement to the "right" and the return. In this decade he began the shift from diagnosis to prescription concerning the role of faith in society. One can perceive that movement by comparing "The Christian Evangel and Social Culture" (1939), "The Christian Church and the World's Crisis" (1941) and "The

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[2]Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," loc. cit., p. 250.

Responsibility of the Church for Society" (1946). All three deal with the task of the church vis à vis culture. The first advises a complete detachment from concern with culture:

> The best way to conserve Christian culture is to forget about it and to let it be built from within in consequence of aspiration after a salvation that lies far beyond it.[3]

The second advocates concentration on the context of social issues:

> It is the church's duty to point out the real not the superficial issues, and to lead men and nations to the ultimate decision, which is not the decision of war or peace but of American peace or peace of God, American war or acceptance of the judgment of God.[4]

The third names the church's responsibility for society as apostolic, pastoral, and pioneering. Of the latter, Niebuhr says,

> As the representative and pioneer of mankind the Church meets its social responsibility when in its own thinking organization and action it functions as a world society, undivided by race, class and national interests. . . . This seems to be the highest form of social responsibility in the Church. It is the direct demonstration of love of God and neighbor rather than a repetition of the commandment to self and others. It is the radical demonstration of faith. . . . In pioneering and representative action of response to God in Christ

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[3] Niebuhr, "The Christian Evangel and Social Culture," loc. cit., p. 48.

[4] H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Christian Church and the World's Crisis," Christianity and Society, VI (1941), p. 17.

> the invisible Church becomes visible and the deed of Christ is reduplicated.[5]

This shift was occasioned by a new appreciation for the social influence of one's perspective.

This development in Niebuhr's thought was brought on by the war.[6] In The Meaning Revelation Niebuhr had advanced the notion that the Christian revelation offered one a paradigm for the interpretation of all events. The war provided an occasion for testing that thesis.

From the perspective of that revelation, Niebuhr found World War II to manifest God's judgment and the pattern of gracious crucifixion.[7] At stake in these essays is always the practical concern

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[5] H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," The Gospel, the Church and the World, ed. Kenneth Scott Latourette, Vol. II of The Interseminary Series (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946), p. 132.

[6] One might say that the war ultimately "made" Niebuhr's theology. Not only his historical realism (the effort to combine human reality and consistent monotheism), but also his insistence on personal moral responsibility in the context of the presence of the one God, was severely put to the test in these years. Hoedemaker, op. cit., p. 41.

[7] H. Richard Niebuhr, "War as the Judgment of God," Christian Century, LIX (1942), p. 631. Cf. H. Richard Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion," Christian Century, LX (1943), p. 515.

of how to respond to the war--or, as Niebuhr puts it, "What is God doing?"

> Christian and Jewish interpretations of history center in the conviction that God is at work in all events and the ethics of these monotheistic communities is determined by the principle that man's action ought always to be response to divine rather than to any finite action.[8]

Divine judgment is absolute, leveling, inclusive and redemptive.[9] Human response to the judgment demands non-defensiveness, non-judgmental action focused on the neighbor's deliverance, and a mood of hope and trust in resurrection.[10] The gracious and redemptive dimension of the war is its character of crucifixion wherein vicarious suffering of the innocent re-calls man to repentance and to face the ultimate demand on his life.[11]

Throughout both these essays, Niebuhr recommends no specific responses to the war. His concern is with that to which man responds or the context in which he responds, not with the particular activity he undertakes.

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[8] Niebuhr, "War as the Judgment of God," loc. cit., p. 630.

[9] Ibid., pp. 631 f.

[10] Ibid., pp. 632 f.

[11] Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion," loc. cit., p. 515.

Between the publication of the two essays, however, an irate Rice University Philosophy professor wrote taking Niebuhr severely to task for his "pathological" and "demented dialectical subleties" which, he charged, create artificial difficulties and even prevent hardheaded straightforward action.[12]

Niebuhr's response was to reassert and to clarify his understanding of the meaning of the war, not to offer strategies of response. His assumption was clarified in a later article.

> Man, being incurably rational, cannot act without some theory of the events in which he is participating. . . . To be sure, theories . . . are not the only factors which influence action, but they are nevertheless important elements in any responsible behavior.[13]

The church committed to faith in divine sovereignty thus offers a theory of events by holding up the gracious activities of God in the midst of ordinary events. It must "seek in every particular that universal being and action which Jesus called Father."[14] The viewpoint from which one undertakes that task requires a "new otherworldliness."

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[12]Virgil C. Aldrich and H. Richard Niebuhr, "Is God in the War?" Christian Century, LIX (1942), p. 953.

[13]Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion," loc. cit., p. 513.

[14]Aldrich and Niebuhr, loc. cit., p. 954.

Niebuhr characterizes that viewpoint in his essay of 1944 "Towards a New Otherworldliness." His premise was that "Man lives in two worlds and when he tries to make his home in one alone something goes wrong with him."[15] The problem at hand is secularism--the isolation in the world of sight, the alienation from the world of value and meaning.

Thus Niebuhr's prescription was for rediscovery of the "other world,"

> . . . which is also man's home, the world of the soul and the spirit, of God and divine action [without which] no answer to the problems of secular civilization and of men confined to that environment will be forthcoming.[16]

"Secularism depends on other-worldliness"[17] in the sense that equanimity and disinterestedness are necessary for successful operation in "this world," and "without attachment to other goods detachment from this worldly concern is not possible."[18] Furthermore the presuppositions, standards and values by which "this world" is ordered have their locus in the "other."

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[15] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Towards a New Otherworldliness," Theology Today, I (1944), p. 78.

[16] Ibid., p. 85.

[17] Ibid., p. 83.

[18] Idem.

But one does not--cannot--seek the other world for the SAKE of this one. The Church cannot probe its heritage of other-worldly wisdom for the SAKE of its temporal utility.

> What is needed, then, is a new otherworldliness, a new preoccupation with the super-natural, with the transcendent God and the community of souls in him. And this preoccupation needs must be directed to the Eternal for its own sake alone.[19]

Niebuhr amplifies this point in his essay of 1946, "Utilitarian Christianity."[20] There he noted that however great the church's guilt vis à vis society and however urgent its imperative to serve the world, the church cannot evaluate itself simply in terms of culture. More particularly, it cannot "sell" itself on the basis of social utility.[21] Not society but God is of supreme value. Yet this

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[19] Ibid., p. 86.

[20] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Utilitarian Christianity," Christianity and Crisis, VI (1946), pp. 3-5.

[21] Ibid., pp. 4 f. One cannot be sure that immediate values befall those who adopt the Christian faith. Niebuhr insists that the application and relevance of Christianity

> . . . must stem from its own imperatives and not from the wishes and desires we entertain apart from the faith (ibid., p. 4).

The church which seeks to minister to society must do so out of the context of the divine will and not that of its own utopias.

> Repentance is called for not because we shall suffer or because civilization will perish if we do not repent, but because others are now perishing for us and because we are attacking the very son of God or God himself in our endeavors to escape suffering and to maintain our civilization at any cost (ibid., p. 5).

perspective provides a certain "disinterestedness" which has social relevance in that it promotes distance towards the world's problems. But solutions which may be found are not peculiarly "Christian."[22] The orientation of the church towards being as the center of value gives one a stance of detachment towards particular beings along with a determination to honor all beings. This again is the dialectic of divine sovereignty at work. And whatever social consequences accrue from this stance are themselves particular beings not to be equated with that orientation from which they sprang or with that center of value which they honor.

The church in pursuit of eternity, however, is not forsaking time; the church seeking context is not avoiding content; the church attacking faith is not evading works. For in holding faithfully to its own distinctive task, the church does for culture what nothing else can: it indicates the ultimate ground out of which all springs and to which all returns and pronounces that One trustworthy.

In "The Gift of the Catholic Vision" (1948) Niebuhr spells out the implications of this two-worldly perspective for perception. Numerous circumstances have converged to promote a viewpoint which transcends cultural determination.

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[22] Ibid., p. 5.

> . . . we have been compelled to attempt to view our civilization from the vantage point of a Church which is resident in many cultures, rather than to view the Church from the standpoint of civilization. Our vision remains conditioned by the culture of which we are a part, yet it does not seem to be limited by it, for our companions in communication and vision are members of other cultures while all of them are citizens of the one Civitas Dei.[23]

That vision is

> . . . the gift to see and to hear, not first of all those who look with us and hear with us but to hear and see what is beyond them and us together. It is directed toward the revelation of God in Christ. . . .[24]

New perception of "that which is over against us" has led to a new appreciation for the community of interpreters in which we live.

> That community of interpreters for us has come to be the Catholic community, in time and space, as well as in inclusiveness of special functions and special views.[25]

The Catholic vision "is the gift of being allowed and required to stand in the Church and with the Church.[26]

That perspective casts the Church in a new light.

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[23]Niebuhr, "The Gift of the Catholic Vision," loc. cit., p. 513.

[24]Ibid., p. 514.

[25]Ibid., p. 515; cf. H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," Theology Today, III (1946), p. 371.

[26]Ibid., p. 516.

> For now we see that the human response to divine action is not so much religion as Church. It is not the Christian religion with which we are concerned, as our predecessors were concerned with it, but the ecclesia which worships, to be sure, which has religious ideas and religious rites, but which is something more inclusive and more strange than a religious association. What is this body of Christ, this Civitas Dei, this new people? . . . Its members forever transcend the boundaries of what men call religion; they form sects and societies within society yet apart from society; they enter restlessly into the political and economic life of the civilization in which they dwell; they seek a Zion which cannot be located in any part of earth and yet are not content to find their beatitude one by one in a heavenly paradise. It is a pilgrim community which makes strangely enduring settlements. It is an abnormal community which does not fit into this world and yet forever seeks to make itself at home in a world that is a Fatherland. It has a King and a law of its own, to which it appeals beyond all the rules and laws of men, but the King is invisible and the law is impractical; and yet all other kings are powerless before him and all the laws save his impractical. The mystery of the Church and the wonder of the Church present themselves to the Catholic view for new inquiry, new interpretation, and then for new reformation and new direction.[27]

The issue for Niebuhr in the 40's was thus twofold: first, what is the perspective from which particular events are viewed, and second, how does that perspective affect the content of one's view and his response? These issues carried multiple implications for understanding the church, both in its nature and its task. In fact the span 1945-1950 saw Niebuhr take a renewed interest in the church

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[27] Ibid., p. 521.

in his writings. During this time he published no fewer than seven articles dealing with various dimensions of the church.[28]

We turn now to an examination of the three most directly relevant to the question of relating the two views of the church.

B. The Church

With his new focus on the perspective of the viewer, Niebuhr turned in the forties to deal once more with the questions of the complex unity of the church and its identity, the former in "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," and the latter in both "The Norm of the Church" and "The Responsibility of the Church for Society." We will consider each in turn.

In the mid forties Niebuhr continued to be plagued by the "Confusing and painful" discrepancy between the Church described

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[28]The following articles by Niebuhr all reflect his concern with the church during the second half of the decade: "Church: Concepts of the Church in Historic Christianity," An Encyclopedia of Religion, ed. Virgilius Ferm (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1945), pp. 169-170; "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," Religion in Life, XV (1945-46), pp. 106-117; "The Norm of the Church," Journal of Religious Thought, IV (1946-47), pp. 5-15; "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," Theology Today, III (1946), pp. 371-384; "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," op. cit., pp. 111-133; "The Gift of the Catholic Vision," Theology Today, IV (1948), pp. 507-521; and "The Disorder of Man in the Church of God," Man's Disorder and God's Design, Vol. I: The Universal Church in God's Design (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), pp. 78-88.

in the creeds and the "Religious organizations which are called by the same name."[29] In its statement of the problem, "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight" harkens back to the "two-realities" assumption of the twenties and thirties, but in its proposed RESOLUTION it sets the stage for full-scale analysis of perspective by stressing the inseparability of the two dimensions of the church. This emphasis, more than the particular resolution it offered, was the significant insight of this essay, for it marked a turn-about from Niebuhr's earlier works wherein the distinction between the two aspects was stressed. If the church is ONE complex reality rather than either two related realities or two distinct moments in a dialectical process, then one must account for the contradictions between faith-statements and empirical statements about the church in some way different from those already advanced.

Niebuhr begins by indicating the contradictions between the "hidden church" and the ecclesiastical organizations.

The "churches in sight" are "all those local, national and international organizations which form a part of our weekly if not daily experience . . ."; they are those

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[29]Niebuhr, "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," loc. cit., p. 106.

> . . . which we organize, support and defend against adversaries, whose doings are reported in the daily newspapers and weekly magazines, which form as intimate a part of our civilization as stores and schools and barber shops . . . ."[30]

But these churches exhibit, not the classical notes of the church, but rather, disunity, un-holiness, non-universality and extra-Christianity. Even a cursory glance at human society reveals the churches as "not only divided but divisive, splitting our human societies into incompatible segments."[31] They are neither one nor universal since they appear in multitudinous and contradictory and competitive forms. Nor are they holy, instead oscillating in every new reformation between a "new secularism or a new self-righteousness."[32]

Concerning their status as Christian, the churches cannot claim the adjective as descriptive. They are syncretistic phenomena tracing their ancestry to many sources other than Jesus Christ.

> Our religious rites, our intellectual systems, our forms of organization, our codes of conduct and all the other features of our common life have come to us from many sources and we find it impossible to

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[30] Ibid., pp. 106 f.

[31] Ibid., p. 107.

[32] Idem.

> show how these features are in reality all derived from Jesus Christ--either after the flesh or after the spirit.[33]

Such diverse influences as

> Roman law, Greek philosophy, Gnostic speculation, mystery religions and household faiths, feudal policy and Germanic ideas of law, rising individualism and new industrialism, nationalism and capitalism, technology and science . . .[34]

have combined with and overshadowed the influence of Jesus Christ in shaping the churches.

The church of faith, on the other hand, is

> . . . the one to which Christians refer when we repeat our creed and say, "I believe in the Holy Catholic Church" or "in the one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church."[35]

Scriptural figures of the rock and the body with many members refer to this Church. "It is one and holy and universal and Christian."[36]

Niebuhr insists vigorously that the Church so described is NOT an ideal depending for its (imperfect) actualization on

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[33] Idem.

[34] Ibid., pp. 107f.

[35] Ibid., p. 106.

[36] Idem.

ecclesiastical organizations. In this he differs from his earlier claims. But the authentic church

> ". . . is not an ideal in the first place but an object of faith and love and an anchor of hope. . . . [It] is more real and dependable than the churches."[37]

The unity of this church is its action of uniting all men in loyalty to God; it "brings us into harmony and unity with the Creator and with Christ and with the Holy Spirit and all these are present in it."[38] Its universality is expressed in the belief that at all times and places ministers of Christ's grace and witnesses to faith are present.

> This Church is the society of those who never lose faith, never succumb to despair, never drop the flag of the world, never abandon their companions in the darkness. It is the holy company of those who receive a constant forgiveness and cleansing of their sins and who in measureless gratitude for measureless love forgive as they have been forgiven. It is the group of fellow workers in our time and in all times to come on which we rely to supplement and correct and remake our work so that it will be fit for eternity. It is the Christian Church of which Christ is the center, the brain and the heart. . . .[39]

It is not a scattering through time and space of elected individuals, for it "is not simply a society of saved men but the saved society of

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[37] Ibid., p. 112.

[38] Idem.

[39] Idem.

men."[40] There is much more mutual influence and interaction than implied in notions of isolated individuals with similar concerns.

But what sort of reality IS "the Church," then, if it is neither an ideal nor a visible social organization? For Niebuhr,

> The Church of faith is an eschatological society. . . . it belongs to that order of existence which can neither be described in temporal terms not abstracted from the temporal. . . . It is the society which is at the very edge of coming into existence, more real than all the communities which are passing away; but it is not to be seen. . . . The Church is the society of that new order of creation in which all things shall become and are new.[41]

With this comment, Niebuhr has introduced a new dimension to the understanding of the church. In the 20's he had spoken of the institution, in the 30's, the movement, and now in the 40's he points to the community of those who comprise the movement. His starting with the given empirical reality of the institution and probing the presuppositions of that reality until finally arriving at a conception of the community stands in helpful contrast to the works of others who, like Brunner, begin with the community and then attempt to account for its development into the institution. Niebuhr's method is to begin with the familiar experienced reality and to lead one to

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[40] Ibid., p. 113.

[41] Ibid., p. 114.

grasp the less accessible concepts by demonstrating their relationship to THAT reality. The community of which Niebuhr speaks is trans-spatial and trans-temporal, yet altogether real and influential. It is NOT, however, a FIXED community whose membership is static. For Niebuhr, participation in the movement defines membership in the community--it is comprised of those who never lose faith and thus remain on the dialectical movement--and one's participation in that movement may wax and wane. The reality of the community is thus like the reality of a wave: indisputably real and powerful, but dependent on no particular individuals for its being.

Niebuhr never develops this notion of the eschatological community, although he speaks of it in several subsequent works.[42] But he always speaks of it in relation to the institution and the movement: the institutions serve this community composed of those moving towards God and from God towards man. He thus holds in sharp focus the complex unity of the church and negates the notion that ONE dimension of the church is separable from or superior to the others. The churches cannot be separated from the Church as antithetical to it.

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[42] For example, Christ and Culture, "The Churches and the Body of Christ," The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, etc.

While it is true that the churches cannot rightly claim to be exclusive bearers of the Church--or to be bearers of the Church exclusively--they are nevertheless among its real representatives.

> . . . the presence of the Church is so tied up with the activity of the churches that we do not know how to separate them.[43]

One simply cannot serve the Church without serving in the churches. For the churches, even in their perversions of Christianity, nevertheless continue to bear witness to

> . . . the unity of the human race in Christ, to the reality of reconciliation and forgiveness in the world, to the glory of our destiny in God.[44]

Its conservatism represents the infinite love which seeks to save every life; its radicalism represents the negation of every finite reality before God; its worship points beyond the secular to the transcendent; its preaching echoes the genuine gospel; its charity symbolizes reponsibility for universal neighbor-love; even its symbols, "even the red cross of warring nations" manifests to some degree the ultimate brotherhood of men.[45]

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[43] Ibid., p. 108.

[44] Ibid., pp. 108 f.

[45] Ibid., p. 109. This perception of positive functions of the ecclesiastical institution separates Niebuhr from Brunner who likewise perceives the contradictions between institution and ecclesia. Cf. Emil Brunner, The Misunderstanding of the Church,

The ecclesiastical organizations are indeed contradictions of the Gospel, but they are also its chief witnesses. Thus the churches can be neither identified with nor separated from the "Church of faith." They remain in a creative tension.

Niebuhr offers two constructive insights into this problem, first, that the Church of faith is an "emergent reality, hidden yet real" and secondly, that the churches are immersed in the process

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trans. Harold Knight (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), espec. pp. 74 ff.).

> Concerning Brunner's conception, Niebuhr writes,
> Professor Brunner's argument rests to a large extent on a sharp disjunction between community and institution, a disjunction that cannot be maintained. . . . Brunner makes a historical development from spiritual community to institution out of a social event that was both spiritual and institutional from its very beginnings.
> --Westminster Bookman, XVIII, No. 2, p. 12.

Niebuhr appreciates Brunner's insights into the limitations of ecclesiastical organizations and finds in them a needed corrective to current thinking. But, he notes,

> The visible and the invisible, the personal and the communal, the spiritual and the physical, the theoretical and the existential, these represent polarities. To dichotomize in Brunner's fashion is to raise more problems than can possibly be solved by this means.
> --Ibid., pp. 12 f.

The church may be a complex reality for Niebuhr, but it is a single reality. This represents an advance over the earlier Social Sources which was much less charitable towards the institutional church, and it is an advance which reflects the dialectic of radical monotheism: the institutions are relative, but also good.

of conversion. The former implies that the church is of a fundamentally DIFFERENT order of creation "in which all things become and are new."[46]

> Under the circumstances a double attitude is always called for and possible to Christians: an attitude of confidence and joy in the Church, an attitude of sorrow and repentance in their churches and for their churches.[47]

The latter, a forerunner of a position developed at length in Christ and Culture, implies that the churches are

> . . . subject to the long process of internal rebirth whereby they are turned from the little gods to the One beyond all gods, from despair to happy confidence and from defensiveness to loyal helpfulness of the brothers.[48]

This means that work in the churches cannot be equated with the work of the Church, but is rather work ministering to that Church.

The significance of this essay, however, is less in his constructive statement than in Niebuhr's statement of the problem. For there he stressed the inseparability of the Church and the churches. This means that the difference between two views of the church must be found elsewhere than in its components. Niebuhr's essay of 1946,

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[46] Niebuhr, "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," loc. cit., p. 114.

[47] Ibid., p. 115.

[48] Ibid., p. 116.

"The Norm of the Church" sought that difference in the viewer's perspective as he inquired into the church's identity.

> The question of the identification of the church assumes different forms for the external observer seeking to define the object of his investigations, for the churchman seeking the ethical or existential essence of his church, and for the community seeking to distinguish its colleagues from its detractors.[49]

If the previous essay showed, by stressing the complex unity of the church, that a perspectival way of relating different views of the church is NECESSARY, then "Norm of the Church," by exploring the implications of several perspectives, showed it to be possible.

Sociologists, sociologists of religion, anthropologists and historians raise the question of the identification of the church from the perspective of "disinterested science."[50] Their intention is to limit the scope of inquiry and to identify the essential features in "the nature or functioning of the organizations they are examining."[51]

What is the church from this perspective? Typically it is defined in distinction from non-religious institutions as religious

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[49] Niebuhr, "The Norm of the Church," loc. cit., p. 1.

[50] Idem.

[51] Idem.

and in relation to the Christian religion as its manifestations. Thus

> The general or formal answer to the question when it is posed in this way runs about as follows: A church is a church when as a religious institution it provides for the practice of the Christian religion in a human group.[52]

Although this definition may be useful for some purposes, it nevertheless lacks the scientific precision which its proponents, as "objective" investigators, desire. In fact it is laden with presuppositions and fraught with ambiguity. It assumes that the church is a sensible phenomenon, that it belongs to a restricted category of religious institutions, that there IS a Christian religion as a particularization of the general order of religions, and that it is dependent on a wider "natural" community which has independence.[53] None of these assumptions is self-evident and none is empirically verifiable.

But the real problem for the external observer comes in identifying the Christian religion of which the church is the manifestation. This is clearly beyond the scope of the observer, and any mark he employs as a norm is bound, on further investigation, to seem arbitrary.

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[52] Ibid., p. 2.

[53] Idem.

> Objectively regarded the Christian religion is a great, syncretistic mass of beliefs, rites, codes, ideas, propositions, myths, forms of organization, patterns of thought and behavior which have been derived from many sources and which coalesce and separate again in a continuous kaleidoscopic movement.[54]

To restrict the adjective "Christian" to institutions having no "alien" influence is to be without any Christian churches at all; to open it to any institution having a trace of Christian influence is to make of it a virtually non-restrictive category.[55]

Niebuhr concludes that the observer is entitled for the purpose of his investigation, "to draw his lines for the sake of convenience and to say that he will regard only those institutions as Christian in which some particular element is found."[56] But he can never be sure that the institution he is examining is "really" Christian and therefore a church, or that the class of institutions he is examining comprehends the category of "church."

These observations in no way remove the sting from "external" critiques of the church as slaves to culture; but they DO relativize those critiques. For the church now appears far more pervasive in society than is true of the objects of sociological inquiry

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[54] Ibid., p. 3.

[55] Idem.

[56] Idem.

which may represent only one form of its appearance.

This is an observation of considerable significance, for it represents the limits of the "external" approach to the church. And in meeting its own limits, the external view discloses the church to be more than what can be fully comprehended within those limits. The attempt to view the church in relation to society disclosed the church to be irreducible to a social institution. The view which attempts to comprehend the church from without finds itself unable to contain this elusive reality claiming for itself a transcendent reference. Only an internal view which perceives that reference can account for the church fully.

But how far can one extend the concept "church" without loss of all determinative meaning? What is that essential principle without which the church would not be the Church? More particularly, how "can we recognize what is a part of the community and what is not?"[57] This can be asked and answered only within the church.

Concerning the moral or existential question of the essential principle central to the church, Niebuhr has

> . . . one fundamental answer: Jesus Christ. Without loyalty to Jesus Christ the church is not church. Without effort to incarnate his spirit it is not church but some other kind of community. The church's

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[57] Ibid., p. 1.

> consciousness of belonging to Jesus Christ is as immediate as the self's awareness of itself. When we are in the presence of Jesus Christ we are church; when we are not in the presence of Jesus Christ our sense of being a "we" group may be ever so strong but we are not church and cannot know ourselves as church, that is, as the community which is the Lord's. To belong to the Lord and to be a church is in effect one and the same thing since no one can belong to the Lord alone. . . . The norm of the church is the presence of Jesus Christ.[58]

A human community, then, becomes and is the church only when Jesus Christ is its norm of action.

Does this limit the Church to those religious organizations wherein Jesus Christ is held up as "our Lord?" Not at all;

> The church . . . is not primarily characterized by the fact that it is a religious community whose religion centers in Jesus Christ, but simply by the fact that as a community it centers in him. In some respects it is better to describe it from within as a moral rather than a religious society. . . . Another way of trying to say this is to call the roll of human associations and to say that each of them becomes and is church when Jesus Christ is its center.[59]

Neither the classical "notes" nor the Protestant sign of Word-Sacrament-Ministry and Discipline define the church. At best these are implications of or pointers to the reality which alone identifies the church, namely Jesus Christ. They are adiaphora.

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[58] Ibid., pp. 3 f.

[59] Ibid., p. 4. Italics mine.

But adiaphora are NOT unimportant just because they are inessential, variable, and relative to the community at hand. For Jesus Christ is no abstraction but a concrete presence the identity and imperatives of whom must be discerned. Thus confessions of faith, theologies, ethics, tradition and pre-eminently the Scriptures serve as means of recognizing that presence.

> . . . whether or not it is clear about the nature of the Christ who is its companion, in any case, it cannot know the mind of this Christ without dependence on the historical Jesus and therefore on the Scriptures.
>
> Jesus Christ, the faith of Jesus Christ and the Scriptures constitute the norm of the church in such fashion that the one implies the other.[60]

Thus religious organizations perform a valid function as guardians of the tradition, but Niebuhr's intention is clearly not to restrict the church to religious organizations of Christianity. He points to a norm transcending those organizations by which they might be judged. Thus the question is whether he has pointed to marks by which the church is known[61] and by which one may recognize the presence of faith in Jesus Christ.

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[60] Ibid., p. 5.

[61] Idem.

> The problem now is not what kind of a religious organization is church, but how the presence of a community of those who are loyal to Jesus Christ manifests itself.[62]

Niebuhr enumerates a list of "marks" of the church, but indicates that none of them is infallible. Any of the visible signs is capable of corruption. Nevertheless where there is faith, certain activities will follow.

Worship is one such mark,

> But entirely too much attention may be paid by the Christian community to the presence of this mark. The community of Jesus Christ becomes apparent in an act of worship but not in an act of worship only--nor infallibly so nor primarily so.[63]

Scriptures, order, discipline and acts of charity are also marks of the church, but in a similar fashion. Wherever there is church, there are these marks. But the equation is not reversible. The marks MAY be present and indicate something quite foreign to the church. Thus Niebuhr concludes,

> There are no ways in which an infallible judgment may be made that Christian church is present.[64]

Marks serve only in a negative function and become helpful only in times of crisis. In normal times the church is "a hidden church

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[62] Idem.

[63] Ibid., p. 6.

[64] Idem.

which works like yeast,"[65] not INVISIBLY, but as active community within human communities embodying the spirit of Jesus Christ in all its relations.

The context out of which one asks the question of the church thus decisively determines both the content and the adequacy of one's answer. Reference to society alone shows itself to be deficient in comprehending the reality at hand. Reference to Jesus Christ, however, offers a norm whereby the church can be identified in a wide variety of manifestations--INCLUDING ecclesiastical institutions.

But Niebuhr points out the difficulty in specifying the content of that norm and ends the essay with a justification of the difficulty.

> To set up a series of negative marks of the church's absence is unnecessary, however, as a general principle; only crisis and the necessity of confessing loyalty to Jesus Christ by separating oneself from that which is contrary to his spirit justify the pronunciations of anathemas. For the rest the church does not need to know how great or small its extent is. It is after all a hidden church which works like yeast. The norm which is important for it is the existential norm and not the standard by means of which it might judge "those who are without."[66]

Aside from demonstrating the possibility of analyzing the church from different viewpoints, this essay confirms another contention

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[65] Ibid., p. 7.

[66] Idem.

of Niebuhr, namely that the church is more than the ecclesiastical institution. It is not a faithful remnant within that institution but an active community of those for whom Jesus Christ is the head. External and internal views alike point to "church" as a greater reality than can be contained in the institution. Finding the external view able to posit the reality of the "hidden church" led Niebuhr further away from the "two-realities" way of previous decades. For the presupposition of that way of relating internal and external views of the church is that each view observes a different reality. Now, however, the objects of the views merge, and the difference between the views must be sought in the context of the viewing itself.

But, as indicated above, Niebuhr remains indefinite regarding the particular content of the church's norm, thus in defining the church.

His definition of the church received a sharpening in the essay written for the Interseminary Series, The Gospel, the Church and the World (1946). Here, he defines the church in terms of its task.

> Indeed the Church itself must be described in these terms as the community which responds to God-in-Christ and Christ-in-God. A society which does not acknowledge its obligation to render account to this

> God and this Christ may call itself church but it is difficult to attach a specific meaning to the term.[67]

What distinguishes the church both from the "world" and from the ecclesiastical institution is its response to the eternal and infinite reality in the particular, temporal and finite.[68] Furthermore

> To be a Christian church is to be a community which is always aware of and responding to the redemptive principle in the world, to Christ-in-God, to the Redeemer.[69]

This two-fold response identifies the church wherever it appears.

Niebuhr identifies this responsibility more closely.

> . . . the content of its responsibility is universal. It is not a corporation with limited liability. . . . All men and all societies, all the realms of being belong to the neighborhood in which this community of Christians is required to perform its function for the common welfare.[70]

Furthermore,

> . . . since it is Christ-in-God to whom account must be rendered, the content of responsibility is always mercy. The Church is not responsible for the judgment or destruction of any beings in the world of God,

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[67] Niebuhr, "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," op. cit., p. 117.

[68] Ibid., pp. 117f.

[69] Ibid., p. 119.

[70] Idem.

> but for the conservation, reformation, redemption and transfiguration of whatever creatures its action touches.[71]

Both worldliness and isolation are perversions of this dual responsibility, the one ignoring TO WHOM responsibility is due and the other, FOR WHAT.[72] Whenever the churches conceive their task as the service of nation, civilization or mankind, they have fallen into worldliness which attributes ultimacy to a finite cause. The irony is that in seeking to serve the world rather than God-in-Christ, "it actually betrays the society it seeks to serve."[73] On the other hand, whenever the churches conceive their task as self-service and deny their accountability for secular societies, they have fallen into isolationism and abandoned society to its own devices.[74]

> The relation to God and the relation to society must neither be confused with each other as is the case in social religion nor separated from each other as is the case in Christian isolationism; they must be maintained in the unity of responsibility to God for the neighbor.[75]

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[71] Ibid., p. 120.

[72] Ibid., pp. 120ff.

[73] Ibid., p. 121.

[74] Ibid., pp. 124f.

[75] Ibid., p. 126, italics mine.

This responsibility, according to Niebuhr, assumes at least three forms, those of apostle, pastor and pioneer.

As apostle, the Church's function is

> . . . to proclaim to the great human societies, with all the persuasiveness and imagination at its disposal, with all the skill it has in becoming all things to all men, that the center and heart of all things, the first and last Being, is utter goodness, complete love. It is the function of the church to convince not only man but mankind, that the goodness which appeared in history in the form of Jesus Christ was not defeated but rose triumphantly from death.[76]

The task is communicating to men and societies the gospel of the trustworthiness of the final power. But

> The good news about the glory of divine goodness is neither rightly proclaimed nor rightly heard if it is not combined with the bad news about the great justice which prevails in God's world.[77]

The present situation of the churches suggests that it needs means of mass communication, ways of proclaiming its Word effectively to SOCIETIES, not just to individuals whether they be officials or private citizens.[78]

As pastor, the Church responds

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[76] Ibid., p. 127.

[77] Ibid., p. 128.

[78] Ibid., pp. 128f.

> . . . to Christ-in-God by being a shepherd of the sheep, a seeker of the lost, the friend of publicans and sinners, of the poor and brokenhearted.[79]

The pastoral responsibility of the Church to God for society requires that its action consider societies as well as individuals and be direct as well as indirect.[80]

As pioneer, the church conceives its responsibility to God for society as representative of society, as

> . . . that part of the human community which responds first to God-in-Christ and Christ-in-God. It is the sensitive and responsive part in every society and mankind as a whole.[81]

Its activities of worship, belief and trust as well as its ethical activities are undertaken on behalf of all.[82] Socially, its activity is repentance--the acknowledging and purging of societal sins, and the leading of society in their abolition.[83]

Niebuhr finds this pioneering activity to be the "highest form of social responsibility in the Church,"

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[79] Ibid., p. 129

[80] Idem.

[81] Ibid., p. 130.

[82] Ibid., p. 131.

[83] Idem.

and the point at which the invisible church becomes visible.[84]

The church spoken of in this essay is the church in action. As such it is neither religious organization nor invisible community. It is rather a PART of every human group, that part which leads the rest in obedience to God. Thus it is the church in motion which is described. This essay identifies the church by its ACTIVITY rather than by a set of static essences. The suggestion is that the "authentic" church is defined primarily by what it DOES and only secondarily by what it IS. Yet that task is discernable only from a perspective which perceives that to which the church responds. An external view thus cannot distinguish the church either by its norm or by its action.

C. The Two Views of the Church

We have now found Niebuhr's work of the 40's to revolve around a concern for the standpoint of one who views the church and for the influence of that standpoint on the content of his view. We have further noticed that this concern emerged from his perception of the complex unity of the church, from the demand for the war to be interpreted in the light of faith, and from the "results" of the

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[84] Ibid., p. 132.

historical scholarship of the 19th century. We have also noted the third dimension which Niebuhr adds to his conception of the church during this period while yet insisting that these dimensions remain inseparable: that the church is a complex unity. We have further observed the way in which one's standpoint influences his perception of the church, and the way in which an "external" standpoint faces its own limits in analyzing the church. Finally, we have noted Niebuhr's clarification of that activity by which the church is identified.

We turn now to examine more closely this perspectivism as a way of relating the two views of the church.

In brief, the position is this: one's particular standpoint in history and faith influences what one sees. Thus one outside the church views that reality in a way that yields different data from that available to one within. Both viewpoints refer to a single complex object, and their results are thus complementary. Furthermore, the internal view, because of its devotion to the God of all reality and truth, INCLUDES the external views within itself, thus transforming, not their data, but their significance.

Niebuhr gave classic expression to this way of relating the two types of statements about the church in The Meaning of Revelation wherein the relationship between internal and external history was

explored at length. But this work was the culmination of a strain of thought which had long occupied his attention.

As we noted above, Niebuhr's two contributions to The Church Against the World both assume two distinct perspectives from which the church is viewed. There he grants that the two perspectives have the same reality as their object--the present form of the ecclesiastical institution--but he denies the identity of their criticisms since they are based on different criteria of value. The theologian may listen to the church's external critics and may be forced to see and hear what he had previously ignored; but once confronted with the data, the theologian alone possessed the standards for analyzing and assessing that data.

Later he develops the implications of his concept of historical relativism. This relativism is

> . . . the realization that the point of view which a man occupies in regarding religious as well as any other sort of reality is of profound importance. This is doubtless an old conviction but it has been refreshed and given a new relevance by modern experience, especially by historical criticism and the self-criticism of theology.[85]

This discovery discounts the possibility of purely objective, universally valid knowledge of things as they are in themselves; " . . . all

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[85] Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, op. cit., pp. 6f.

knowledge is conditioned by the standpoint of the knower."[86] History and sociology, in pursuing their human self-criticism, have demonstrated that man is conditioned not only by his psychological makeup but also by his social inheritance.[87]

> The patterns and models we employ to understand the historical world may have had a heavenly origin, but as we know and use them they are, like ourselves, creatures of history and time; though we direct our thought to eternal and transcendent beings, it is not eternal and transcendent; though we regard the universal, the image of the universal in our mind is not a universal image.[88]

The importance of this relativism is NOT that human knowledge and certainty are impossible. It is rather the discovery that every man occupies some particular historical, spatio-temporal, religious point of view, and that all his knowledge is conditioned by that viewpoint. But he need not doubt that WHAT he views from a particular viewpoint and conceives in historical (thus relative) categories may itself be universal.[89] The test of one's concepts is whether or not others occupying the same general standpoint and participating in the same social history may look at the same aspect

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[86] Ibid., p. 7.

[87] Ibid., p. 9; cf. Lonnie D. Kliever, "The Christology of H. Richard Niebuhr," The Journal of Religion, L (1970), pp. 34 f.

[88] Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, op. cit., p. 10.

[89] Ibid., p. 18.

of the universal and express what they see in concepts resembling one's own.[90]

The community in which man stands, however, is not simply neutrally temporal; it is also religious, i.e., centered in faith in either God or idol. Both Schleiermacher and Ritschl saw this, but they used the insight to concentrate on the religious subject rather than faith's object; Niebuhr proposes to begin where they began, but to remain focused on the object of faith,[91] while still recognizing that "There is no neutral standpoint and no faithless situation from which approach can be made to that which is inseparable from faith."[92]

Since every man thus stands in some particular historical-religious community, an external view of the church is a view of one whose perception and conceptuality are conditioned by a history and faith of some other-than-Christian community; should such a person view the church he would regard his object as "an uninterested spectator" looking on from the outside at "occurrences in a stranger's life. . . ."[93] On the other hand, a participant in that

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[90] Ibid., p. 19.

[91] Ibid., pp. 22-38.

[92] Ibid., p. 37.

[93] Ibid., p. 59.

community would be more concerned about the personal and communal significance of the data. The distinction is analogous to the difference between looking at a photograph of strangers and observing oneself in a mirror.

But it is not simply one's locus in time and tradition that identifies a view of the church as external or internal. For that point of view enters into his perception and causes that which he sees to be "seen in different aspects and apprehended in different contexts,"[94] from one who stands elsewhere. The object of investigation appears differently to an external view than to an internal one. The external view is concerned to abstract from the complexity of selves and their subjective drives; its objects are things, not persons; its concern is with observable data and not experienced life.[95] The external viewpoint regards value as strength or quantitative effect on other items; power is the decisive determinant of importance.[96] Time is viewed as chronological, quantitative and serial, but not as experienced or organic and social.[97] Furthermore, the external point of view regards societies

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[94] Ibid., p. 61.

[95] Cf. ibid., p. 62.

[96] Ibid., p. 68.

[97] Ibid., p. 69.

> . . . as made up of atomic individuals related to each other by external bonds. Yet even human individuals are depersonalized, since they are understood as complexes of psychological and biological factors. Society to his view is a vast and intricate organization of interests, drives or instincts, beliefs, customs, laws, constitutions, inventions, geographical and climatic data, in which a critical and diligent inquiry can discover some intelligible structures and moving patterns of relation.[98]

On the other hand, an internal point of view does not abstract from the immediate relationship of the viewer to his object and presents the organic and personal dimensions of that relationship. For this viewpoint, time is organic and social, a matter for memory and hope rather than simply chronology. Value is determined by its relationship to selves in community, and society is perceived as "a community of selves. Here we do not only live among other selves but they live in us and we in them."[99]

In The Meaning of Revelation, Niebuhr does not maintain that internal and external perspectives view different objects, although that had been his previous contention. Rather, he suggests here that the one object of the two views differs according to the perspective of the viewer. Human community is many-faceted, and any perspective from which it is viewed apprehends certain dimensions and

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[98] Ibid., p. 70.

[99] Idem.

obscures others: "only uncritical dogmatism will affirm that truth is the prerogative of one of the points of view."[100] But

> External history is the medium in which internal history exists and comes to life. Hence knowledge of its external history remains a duty of the church.[101]

The difference between this version of perspectivism and its predecessor is obvious: The previous work posited a TENSION or CONFLICT between alternative views of the church, although it recognized a single object of both. Here, however, Niebuhr posits a COMPLEMENTARY relationship between them: they refer to a single object which, however, is "two-dimensional." It has a dimension of exterior relationships and a dimension of significance-for-selves. But these are NOT two realities, nor are they necessarily contradictory. The latter resides in--and only in--the former, so that there is neither separation nor identification of the dimensions.[102]

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[100] Ibid., p. 63; cf. Niebuhr, "The Church Defines Itself in the World" (unpublished paper, 1957), p. 5.

[101] Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, op. cit., p. 90.

[102] Cf. Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 102 ff.

> In all this we have only repeated the paradox of Chalcedonian Christology and of the two-world ethics of Christianity.[103]

The character of Niebuhr's perspectivism has been helpfully clarified by Van Harvey in his distinction between "hard" and "soft" perspectivism. The former refuses to acknowledge a significant distinction between facts and interpretations.[104] It stresses the value-laden character of ALL statements and renders impossible a compatibility of differing viewpoints. They can agree only where they are identical; where they are different they cannot complement each other, for values are so bound to a viewpoint that there is no such thing as "hard data" which could be interpreted by various viewpoints. Now "The Question of the Church," "Towards the Independence of the Church" and the later "Utilitarian Christianity" have this in common: that they find incompatible the two ways of viewing the church PRECISELY because of the differences of valuation within each. One might easily slip into the assumption that Niebuhr's perspectivism was of the "hard" variety because of the critique of the cultural viewpoint in these works and then find a

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[103] Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, op. cit., p. 90.

[104] Van A. Harvey, The Historian and the Believer (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), p. 214.

shift between this position and the "soft" perspectivism of The Meaning of Revelation.

That would be a mistake. For even in the essays, Niebuhr acknowledged the accuracy of the "facts" presented by external views and the necessity for an internal view to take cognizance of them. His ground for complaint was in the inadequate interpretation of these facts on the part of those outside the community and the too-easy acceptance of these interpretations by those within.

In Meaning of Revelation, however, Niebuhr emphasizes the other side of the same coin, namely, the need to accept and acknowledge the data presented by the "external" viewers. And, as Harvey noted, in this work he definitely de-emphasized the close relationship between facts and values,[105] using "external history" as a term broad enough to include alien INTERNAL histories. Viewed in the light of the other three essays, however, one finds Niebuhr as one for whom "external facts" are facts regardless of who discovers them but for whom values and interpretations are a function of one's standpoint.

The implication which may be drawn from this is that, for Niebuhr, there is ONE church, not two, and that this one church is

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[105] Ibid., pp. 238f.

visible from two entirely different perspectives. The theologian does not see any more than does the sociologist and vice versa; the hard data about the reality of a historical movement issuing in multiple social institutions is equally accessible to both. Their point of difference, and it is a crucial one, is in the interpretation and evaluation accorded the observation. Thus when the theologian uses such phrases as "People of God," "Body of Christ," "Chosen People," "One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic," etc., he is not referring to a different reality visible only to the eyes of faith. He may well be positing VALUES which are visible only from a certain viewpoint, but the REALITY to which these values apply is also visible to the social scientist.

Once this is clarified, the REAL points of difference between perspectives become apparent AND disputable. Gnostic "superknowledge" is denied BOTH the theologian AND the social scientist. Their differences are issues of faith--valuation--context. And when this is made clear, fruitful and non-defensive dialogue between the advocates of the perspectives may proceed.

Nevertheless, the perspectival way of representing the relationship between two views of the church, as it appears in The Meaning of Revelation, is not without difficulties. Three which we will mention all relate to Niebuhr's insufficient clarity in the 40's

concerning what constitutes a viewpoint, an issue with which he was to struggle at length in the next decade.

First, one notices a departure from his own position regarding the potential for an external view to view the church. In The Meaning of Revelation and in the earlier anthology, The Church Against the World, Niebuhr had assumed both the possibility and the actuality of external views of the church. But as we noticed in the preceding section, both "The Norm of the Church" and "The Responsibility of the Church for Society" so define the church that an external view cannot identify it. But if this be the case, then Niebuhr's claim that incorporation of the external view of the church is a moral imperative for those within[106] loses its force. If, on the other hand, the claims of the essays be permitted to stand (namely that the external view cannot identify the church accurately), then Niebuhr's emphasis on the complex unity of the church falls apart and the religious institution is set apart from the "real" church. Nevertheless one cannot reject those claims without suggesting that a viewpoint outside the church can perceive Jesus Christ functioning normatively and God-in-Christ and Christ-in-God as object of response; yet precisely the perception of these realities constitutes a

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[106] Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, op. cit., p. 88.

viewpoint within the church. The appearance of this difficulty demands the clarification of what constitutes a viewpoint.

The second difficulty concerns a shifting notion of the inclusive viewpoint in Niebuhr's concept of the church. In Social Sources Niebuhr found the "true" church to be tucked away IN the religious institutions. But Kingdom of God in America found the "true" church to be the inclusive reality, one component of which was the religious institution. The former regarded the external, the latter, the internal viewpoint as inclusive of the other. The Meaning of Revelation adds another dimension. In it, there is a peculiar return to the inclusiveness of the external view, NOT, however, because religious institutions contain the whole church BUT because both institution and movement exist within the course of universal "external history." The one who views the church "from without" as movement and institution within universal history related to that history thus has the larger viewpoint. But--paradoxically--this is the view "through the eyes of God,"[107] for only God can perceive history in its wholeness; thus the viewpoint which tries to regard history through the eyes of God is precisely the viewpoint WITHIN the

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[107] Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, op. cit., p. 88.

community of faith although its object of concern is the church in its external relations.

The third difficulty concerns an ambiguity in identifying the viewpoints about which he speaks. As Van Harvey notes, Niebuhr exhibits

> . . . a confusing equivocation concerning the meaning of external history. On the one hand, external history is analyzed by Niebuhr as disinterested history. On the other hand, external history is a category-bin, so to speak, into which he throws everything that is not the inner history of the Christian community, including all alien internal histories that cannot be characterized as either disinterested or objective.[108]

A third meaning occurs when Niebuhr speaks of external history as the external facts which internal history interprets.[109] This ambiguity makes it difficult to discern what constitutes a viewpoint for Niebuhr and suggests that he was not himself altogether clear on this point.

In our previous discussion we have presupposed the first meaning, for this, on balance, seems to represent the distinction which Niebuhr wishes to stress in this work. But the confusion is present and leads to just the problems Harvey notes: (1) the impossibility, given Niebuhr's definition, of incorporating into one's

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[108] Harvey, op. cit., p. 238.

[109] Ibid., p. 239.

own view alien INTERNAL histories without abandoning one's own, and (2) the contradiction of maintaining both the impossibility and the necessity of synthesizing inner and outer views.[110] Harvey proposes to preserve Niebuhr's insights by inquiring more closely into the constitution of a viewpoint.[111]

> Perspectives are field-encompassing. They contain factual judgments, value-judgments, estimates of importance, metaphysical beliefs, assumptions about human nature, as well as procedural rules.[112]

We agree with Harvey in this observation and in his further contention that

> The Christians' insights lie at a different level, at the level of the kinds of significance one attaches to these events which are otherwise known in the way any event can be known.[113]

In fact the basis for these observations was laid by Niebuhr himself in work which began in the 40's and continued into the next decade of his career.

Finally it was NOT the historical- and faith-standpoint of a subject which defined a viewpoint for Niebuhr. The difference between

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[110] Ibid., pp. 238f.

[111] Ibid., pp. 239ff.

[112] Ibid., p. 241.

[113] Ibid., p. 242.

views of the church is not accounted for simply by reference to the history and faith of the viewer. These matters merely indicate the arena in which the difference is to be found and do not specify the content of that difference.

As Niebuhr indicated in The Church Against the World, an external view is one which views the church in relationship to values other than those in relation to which the church perceives itself. That this is a legitimate undertaking derives from the church's internal conviction about its ultimate value, God. Whatever other values it may be viewed in relation to, both it and the other values are penultimate; yet because God is sovereign, every other value is invested with as much significance as is the church itself.[114] Thus it is legitimate--even helpful--to view the church in relationship to economic, political and social values,[115] for it has interacted with social organizations and they, like the church, are under the sovereignty of God. Only when these penultimate values begin to claim ultimacy, as they invariably do, must they be shown to be finite, partial and relative.

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[114] Libertus A. Hoedemaker, Faith in Total Life: Style and Direction of H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology, (doctoral dissertation, University of Utrecht, 1966), p. 226; Niebuhr, "The Church Defines Itself in the World," op. cit., p. 7.

[115] Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America, op. cit., pp. 4-7.

This, however, brings us to the crux of the matter: the significance and value of a reality is determined by the CONTEXT in which that reality is viewed and to which it is related; the context of a reality is value-laden (religious).[116] Niebuhr spells out this principle with respect to particular actions in "The Christian Church in the World's Crisis" wherein he states,

> A single action apart from a total context may effect events as an accident does, but not otherwise. It derives significance only from the context in which it stands; and the context which carries the action along which makes it a part of a total pattern, is determined by religion.[117]

While this principle is not explicated at length by Niebuhr, the lengths to which he went to analyze and describe religious, cultural and theological contexts in his works suggest that it functioned as one of his operating assumptions. The definitive element of a viewpoint may thus be understood as THE CONTEXT IN RELATION TO WHICH IT INTERPRETS A REALITY. An external view analyzes the church in relation to culture, and an internal, to its ultimate context, God.[118]

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[116]Cf. Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," op. cit., p. 87: " . . . the value of a being is dependent on the context of its relation to another being."

[117]Niebuhr, "The Christian Church and the World's Crisis," loc. cit., p. 11.

[118]James H. Gustafson, Treasure in Earthen Vessels (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 106.

And to view the church in a context different from the ultimate one in which it regards itself may distort the meaning and significance of the church as it is viewed from within. It may elevate a secondary function to the status of primary intention.[119] Yet the church exists in penultimate contexts and has secondary functions; thus their exposition must be welcome by one for whom all reality is under the sovereignty of God. Nevertheless they cannot be allowed to stand un-relativized without imposing a meaning and significance on the church alien to that issuing from its faith of radical monotheism.

Niebuhr's concept of viewpoint is thus a complex notion involving the three dimensions noted above: the historical-faith locus of the viewer, the aspect of the object viewed, and the context within which the object is interpreted.

Development of his notion of context as definitive of the two views of the church allows Niebuhr to deal with the difficulties of the more subjectively-oriented perspectivism dominant in his thought of the 40's. For if the internal view of the church be defined as referring to the ultimate context of Being as its valuational center, then this view is in principle wholly inclusive. In principle it must remain open to the values held by external views which refer to a

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[119] Cf. Niebuhr, "Utilitarian Christianity," loc. cit.

penultimate context, for they are good. But it must recontextualize them so that their significance is transformed, and they too become transparent to that ultimate reality, God. Furthermore, it allows for a dynamic interaction among viewpoints wherein penultimate contexts may alternately obscure and reveal the ultimate context of being. Finally, it allows him so to construct the problem of the relationship between viewpoints during the 50's that the faith-problem of conversion becomes not just an individual but also a social concern.

The implication of Niebuhr's perspectivism is to place the church wholly within the arena of sociological analysis: even its "transcendent" dimension must be posited by the competent social scientist. This means, however, that the theologians could no longer rely smugly on an invisible ubiquitous community secure from the charges leveled by external critics. Now they were obliged, not only to acknowledge the criticisms but to INTERNALIZE them, i.e., to find in them not only the criticisms of men but the judgment of God. The effect is to call into question traditional language about the church--its unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. To what social reality do these terms apply? And how is that reality related to the ecclesiastical institutions which are manifestly NOT one, holy and universal and whose apostolicity is at best mixed?

The theologian who recognizes this situation, however, has a genuine crisis on his hands. For now he is faced with the problem of making sense out of the application of "one, holy, catholic and apostolic" to that social reality which appears "to the unprejudiced eye" to be other than what those terms indicate. What justifies his perspective? How is it intelligible? Why does his assertion not meet what Flew calls the "death by a thousand qualifications"?[120] The old ploy was to reserve these terms for some other reality than the visible one; another was to redefine the terms so that they did not really mean what they seemed to imply. Niebuhr rejected both these ploys, however, and pointed instead to the context--the ultimate context of being--in light of which all things undergo a transvaluation of values. And then he began to speak of CONVERSION.

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[120] Anthony Flew, "Theology and Falsification," New Essays in Philosophical Theology, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (London: SCM Press, 1966), p. 97.

CHAPTER V

THE FIFTIES: CONTEXT AND CONVERSION

Thus far we have examined three of Niebuhr's "resolutions" of the problem of the relationship between external and internal views of the church. The first two posited a correlation between view and object viewed, then sought to explain the relationship between two aspects of the church. The third way affirmed the reality of two related aspects of the church, but showed them to be so closely related that it is no longer helpful to suggest that a view can perceive one apart from the others. The locus of the relationship thus shifted from object to viewer, and the two views were identified by the viewer's perspective. We then found Niebuhr's notion of perspective to involve reference to the historical and religious community of the viewer but to be defined by reference to the context in which the object is interpreted; an external view of the church examines it in relationship to culture, and an internal one, in relationship to God. Furthermore, we found that the internal perspective with its reference to the ultimate context of being itself was inclusive of all penultimate contexts and thus demanded, for its own clarification, inclusion

of external views of the church. We have found each of these "ways" of dealing with the problem to be related to the concerns of Niebuhr as theologian and churchman during a decade of his work, and have explored at some length the insights into the church's nature and task as illumined during this time. Our task has been to establish a heuristic framework in which the various insights and emphases of Niebuhr may be understood. Thus we have been offering a typological and historical--thus a thoroughly Niebuhrian--approach to understanding Niebuhr's works. We now continue this approach with an analysis of Niebuhr's work during the 1950's.

During the last full decade of his life, Niebuhr offered a fourth "way" of relating the two views of the church and it, like its predecessors, is related to his particular concerns of the time, and it offers particular insights into the church. It is the way of CONVERSION. Building on his previous positions, Niebuhr now acknowledges the reality of two related dimensions of the church and two possible contexts in which those dimensions may be interpreted, but now he adds the notion of a dynamic relationship between them: both the ambiguous human community with its corrupted and corrupting penultimate relations and the viewer's perception of the church in these relations are intruded upon and TRANSFORMED in a perpetual process of recontextualization.

In this chapter, we will follow our previous method and examine first the interests and emphases of Niebuhr during the 1950's, secondly, the content of his conception of the church during this period, and thirdly, his concept of conversion as a way of understanding the relationship between internal and external views of the church. The 1950's represent something of a culmination of Niebuhr's thought about the church; during this decade he drew together various strands which had emerged in his thinking prior to this time. But he added a new emphasis--the transforming effect of a context. This emphasis emerged as a result of his renewed interest in the church's task in the world and his increased awareness of the communal dimension of the church.

A. Historical Context

In the 50's, Niebuhr spoke of a process of CONVERSION or TRANSFORMATION in which the finite context from which one has derived his interpretation and values becomes transparent to the universal context of all being. A transformation of values follows in which all things derive their significance in relationship to the ultimate. The faith of the viewer, the significance of the object, and the object itself are transformed in a continual process of re-contextualization.

We turn now to an examination of Niebuhr's concerns during the decade that saw this motif come to the fore in his work.

Niebuhr acknowledges that the 50's were for him the second time in which he changed his mind.[1] It was the time of turning away from the path of the Barthians and the resumption of

> . . . the general line of march represented by the evangelical, empirical, and critical movement.[2]

He attributes this change to his concentration on faith as trust and loyalty instead of orthodox belief, and now finds his mentors to be Edwards, Schleiermacher, Coleridge, Bushnell and Maurice.[3] One must be careful in noting the locus of that change of mind, however, for the continuities in Niebuhr's work of the 50's with that of the previous decades are numerous.[4]

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[1]Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," loc. cit., p. 248.

[2]Ibid., p. 250.

[3]Idem.

[4]Indeed, Hoedemaker disagrees with Niebuhr's suggestion that the 1950's represented something like a second conversion, for he finds Niebuhr to be still pursuing the

> . . . Troeltschean problem--the absolute value of the individual event, the presence of the universal in the particular, the danger of defensiveness, and the urgent moral problem of responsible activity. . . .

Op. cit., p. 49.

Now, however, he pursued that problem with the concept of radical monotheism firmly ingrained in his thinking.

The 50's did see a shift in the direction in which Niebuhr sought to move the church, thus a shift in the particular relationship of the church to culture, but even that was foreshadowed. In the 30's he had perceived the relationship of faith to social change; in the 40's he examined the influence of faith on perception and suggested that the church had a role as "social pioneer." In the 50's he inquired further into the influence of faith on behavior and into the consequent work of the church seeking society's conversion. This emphasis arose from his analysis of the social conditions of the time and led to a renewed interest in the work of the church in the world. We will examine first, Niebuhr's awareness of the impact of faith on ethics, then observe his perception of the faith-situation of the 1950's and finally note some of his activities in gearing the church for "reentry" into the world.

In "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics" Niebuhr exposes the two types of faith manifested in various religious activities and thus establishes the close link between faith and ethics that underlay his thinking.[5]

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[5]H. Richard Niebuhr, "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," The Heritage of the Reformation: Essays Commemorating the Centennial of Eden Theological Seminary, ed. E.J.F. Arndt (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1950), pp. 211-229.

One category of religious activity is characterized by DEFENSIVENESS; Niebuhr labels this, "Protestant Ethics." It takes at least three forms, each one of which has many expressions. Kultur-Protestantismus, ecclesiasticism and individualism all exhibit the basic stance of defensiveness which is one dimension of post-Reformation Christianity.[6]

Niebuhr maintains that this defensive ethical posture is a perversion of the explicit gospel and ethics of "Evangelical" Christianity. But he does not permit a separation of the two. "Protestant" ethics is defensive because it places its trust in human reality which is corruptible and corrupted. But this corruption is known as "the negative counterpart of theocentrism."[7]

> The acknowledgement that God saves us by his grace has as its negative counterpart the conviction that we do not save ourselves from moral and spiritual death by our works. An ethics, however, which takes the latter conviction as its starting point will differ widely and radically from one which begins with the former. It will be an ethics of despair rather than of hope, a negatively humanistic rather than a positively theistic ethics. And it cannot but fall into a new defensiveness, though what will now be defended will not be man's righteousness but perhaps physical life or wealth or a recognizeably temporal and sinful culture.[8]

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[6] Cf. Ibid., pp. 213-218.

[7] Ibid., p. 221.

[8] Ibid., pp. 221f.

Niebuhr then characterizes the religious activity which is authentically Christian as "evangelical ethics." It is identified by its radically THEOCENTRIC orientation, and for that reason, is not visible to the observer,[9] but this orientation recognizes the fallibility of the church and of scripture and of man, and it does not derive its authority from them. Nor does it concentrate on that fallibility, for its concern is with the Lord.[10]

But concern with God produces ethical activity. Just as the context of an act gives it significance, so also does the faith of an agent give him direction.

> . . . faith and ethics belong together. . . . The direction of a man's loyalty and trust gives direction to every act he performs. . . . The conduct of life issues out of the central faith, not as conclusions are drawn from premises, but as fruit derives from trees. . . . Hence the great ethical question is always the question of faith, "In what does man trust?"[11]

Thus the church at work on the faith of men is dealing squarely with the ethical issues of the time.

> The recognition of this deep connection between conduct and faith is mated, then, with the understanding that the reformation of faith is the reformation of life and that the great work of Christ for moral beings is his

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[9] Ibid., pp. 219f.

[10] Ibid., p. 222.

[11] Ibid., pp. 222f.

> work as the renewer and transformer of faith. He redeems us by reconciling us to God. . . . Faith in God is the gift of God through Jesus Christ and with that faith all things are given, including the transformation of human conduct.[12]

Evangelical ethics, however, is MOMENTARY, both in the sense of being geared towards the present moment rather than the uncertain future and in the sense of appearing in occasional actions.[13]

The church's gift to society, then, is its witness to the trustworthiness of Being which is the presupposition of faith which is the presupposition of moral action. Concern with conversion of faith, then, is precisely a SOCIAL concern, but NOT a socially utilitarian one. For conversion is to God, not society.

With this presupposition clearly in mind, Niebuhr then set out to identify the faith-situation of the decade. His first effort in this direction was given as a lecture series in 1950 entitled The Gospel for a Time of Fears.[14] There he analyzed the dominant cultural faith and raised the question of the appropriate form of the Gospel for such a time.

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[12] Ibid., p. 223, italics mine.

[13] Ibid., pp. 227f.

[14] H. Richard Niebuhr, The Gospel for a Time of Fears (Washington, D.C.: Henderson Services, 1950).

Man in 1950 finds himself up against SPIRITUAL FORCES, forces beyond his control which inhabit individual psyches as well as sociál relations. Phobias, complexes, fears, communism, National Socialism, McCarthyism--all these current phenomena represented for Niebuhr a sign that man found himself in 1950 forced to deal with spiritual forces threatening to overwhelm him.[15]

His sense of time was short.

> I do not mean that we have the idea that we're going to die tomorrow or that in five years from now our country will come to an end; I mean that we can no longer reckon on a long period of time. . . .[16]

Concerning freedom, people

> . . . do not have too much of a sense of freedom--just a great sense of bondage. We are in bondage; we would love to get out of this couloir, but there's no hiding place down here. . . . The freedom we want is the freedom from the bondage to these spiritual forces.[17]

Furthermore, America is in a very defensive mood. "Democracy" and "the American Way of Life" have become

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[15] Ibid., pp. 4-7.

[16] Ibid., p. 7.

[17] Ibid., p. 8.

spiritual forces[18] which are producing further bondage rather than the freedom they vaunt.

Niebuhr further elaborated on Western man's spiritual crisis in his introduction to The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry. This work reflects once more his sense of the inseparability of faith and society.

> After a long period in which the need for many for a sense of life's meaning seemed to be supplied by the progress of a civilization or by the realization of national destiny, disillusionment with the half-gods has made itself felt. Men who felt that they were born to die for the glory of nation or culture or for the sake of unborn generations or the advancement of knowledge, have been succeeded by generations who ask the ultimate questions with which religion and theology are concerned. Further, it is increasingly recognized by the thoughtful that the foundations of our civilization rest on deeper convictions than those generally acknowledged; that science and democratic life, literature and art, derive their ultimate orientation from religious faith; and that without renewal of the foundations the structure cannot endure.[19]

Here again Niebuhr's concerns for society and for faith merge providing an impetus for his continued relfection on the church.

That same year (1954) he assessed the American religious scene for the report of the Secretariat for Evangelism at the meeting

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[18] Idem.

[19] Niebuhr, The Purpose . . ., op. cit., p. ix.

of the W.C.C. in Evanston, Illinois in 1954. In that report he found outspoken rivalry to Christianity to be minimal, but Christian illiteracy and churchly dissatisfaction to be widespread. Furthermore,

> . . . among the religiously literate and illiterate there is manifest a widespread hunger and thirst for a faith, for a sense of life's meaning, for genuinely good news about man in his history, for a glory that has passed away from life and left it brassy and masculate.[20]

Man's penultimate context had become visibly unworthy of trust, and he had begun to ask ultimate questions.

For Niebuhr, a time of such spiritual crisis was the time for a re-emphasis on the content of the Gospel and the work of the church, both examined in relation to their historical context. His more directly theological works of the decade reflect in their titles this concern with the relating of man's ultimate and penultimate context: 'The Gospel for a Time of Fears, Christ and Culture, "The Idea of Covenant and American Democracy," "The Center of Value," and Radical Monotheism and Western Culture (given as lectures in 1957, but not published until 1960).

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[20] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Who Are the Unbelievers and What Do They Believe?" Report submitted to Secretariat for Evangelism, World Council of Churches, Second Assembly, The Christian Hope and the Task of the Church: Six Ecumenical Surveys and the Report of the Assembly prepared by the Advisory Commission on the Main Theme, 1954 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), p. 36.

Niebuhr found the Gospel appropriate for such a time to emphasize man's ultimate context, the present reign and will of God.[21] The Christological gospel is one which answers

> The two great problems of religion, and of our world today . . . (1) is God good? (2) Is goodness powerful? In Christ we have an answer to both these questions, for he demonstrates the goodness of power and the power of goodness--a power so great that death cannot hold him.[22]

These are the questions raised in the spiritual crisis, and the answer which the church offers has much social significance.

But the concern with the Gospel is not social utilitarianism.

> . . . the promise that if we seek the kingdom of God, all these other things will be added to us must not be converted into the statement that we must seek the kingdom in order that all these things may be added unto us. As soon as we do that, we have dropped the search for the kingdom of God, and have substituted for it the search for our own kingdom.[23]

The fine line between utilitarianism and the societal implications of the Gospel became visible to Niebuhr and raised for him the question of the relationship between the church's two authorities. Christ and Culture appeared the next year as his attempt to examine that question and the church's typical answers.

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[21] Ibid., p. 17.

[22] Ibid., p. 21.

[23] Ibid., p. 16.

A time so ripe for the witness of the church because of its internal crisis of faith was a time for re-tooling the church for its task. Niebuhr was intimately involved in this re-tooling.

In December of 1953, he was appointed director of a study of theological education in the United States and Canada sponsored by the American Association of Theological Schools and financed by the Carnegie Corporation. In this capacity he was charged with the administration of a research project studying "the work which the theological schools do in preparation of persons who are to serve in the parish ministry."[24] Principal among the secondary questions to be investigated "has to do with the role of the minister in contemporary life."[25] Objective of the study "is the improvement of the work done by theological schools."[26]

Niebuhr's own understanding of his task was articulated in a preliminary statement to Lewis J. Sherrill, then chairman of the A.A.T.S. Executive Committee. He understood the study to revolve around two foci:

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[24] Administrative Committee of the American Association of Theological Schools, A Study of Theological Education in the United States and Canada, Bulletin I of Theological Education in America, April, 1954, p. 1.

[25] Idem.

[26] Ibid., p. 2.

> On the one hand we shall try to arrive at some fairly and generally acceptable definition of the good minister; on the other hand we shall try to answer the question, What can theological schools do towards the development of good ministers?

Methodology for conducting the research included study of existing works in the field, extensive interviewing and visitation of concerned parties, specialized task forces exploring particular areas, and periodic publication of preliminary findings for discussion and revision.[27] Daniel Day Williams and James M. Gustafson were his colleagues in this immensely influential study. Responsibility for different aspects of the study was divided among the three, but Niebuhr as director gave primary attention to the churches and the minister.[28]

Niebuhr worked hard for church renewal in the 50's, but his relationship to the Ecumenical Movement in its "institutional" form

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[27]Additional data concerning the aims, methods and composition of the study may be found in its published results: Theological Education in America (5 Bulletins, April, 1954-April, 1956), H. Richard Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry: Reflections on the Aims of Theological Education (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), and H. Richard Niebuhr, Daniel Day Williams, and James M. Gustafson, The Advancement of Theological Education (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957). Another book, H. Richard Niebuhr and Daniel Day Williams, eds., The Ministry in Historical Perspective (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), was financed by the study but did not count itself as an official part of the results.

[28]Niebuhr, Williams and Gustafson, op. cit., p. x.

continued to be peripheral--AND edgy. To be a major theologian in the first half of this century was of necessity to be drawn into the movement of church unity represented by the World Council of Churches. And yet Niebuhr continually found himself opposed to particular emphases or directions of that movement. Social Sources contained a critique of attempts to seek a unity based on theological agreement--this two years after the Lausanne conference on Faith and Order with its emphasis on "comparative ecclesiology" and its conviction that the unity of the church is the will of God. "The Disorder of Man in the Church of God" was published as a part of the study for the Amsterdam Assembly of the W.C.C. in 1948, and it was explicitly critical of statements of ecumenists lamenting the church's sin of disunity; "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church" explicitly opposed the Christocentrism implied in the W.C.C.'s membership requirements ("Jesus Christ as God and Savior"). Now in the 50's Niebuhr expressed his impatience with efforts of ecumenists to emphasize the opposition of the church and the world for the sake of church unity. He explicitly registered his opposition to these efforts in the essay of 1957 entitled "The Church Defines Itself in the World" (delivered to Christ and the Church Commission of the W.C.C. meeting in Greenwich, Connecticut).

Niebuhr's ecumenism was based on other concerns than those for organizational unification. Niebuhr found that lay Christians, whether or not affiliated with organized Churches, were doing much of the most effective communication of the Christian understanding of life.

> What is implied is that the Church is a much wider (if also narrower) reality than the churches can represent, and that the latter as members of the body of Christ serve and are served by other members not so easily identified as organs of that body.[29]

Hoedemaker well characterizes Niebuhr's position when he says

> Neither Christ nor the Church can, therefore, be the center of our search for unity. For apart from their reference to God and to HIS unity, both Christ and the church become principles of closedness and defense.[30]

To recapitulate our findings, Niebuhr in the 50's remained the man of deep social concern. His concern was directed towards the underlying faith of society rather than with its surface manifestation, and he saw that fundamental social change was inseparable from a transformation of faith. Just this transformation was the business of the church. But what is the church and how may it proceed?

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[29] Hoedemaker, The Theology . . ., op. cit., p. 146; cf. H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Church Defines Itself in the World" (unpublished lecture, 1957), p. 7.

[30] Ibid., p. 37.

B. The Church

In his examination of the church in the 1950's, Niebuhr paid close attention to the issue of context and its transforming effects. He examines that issue first in relation to the church itself and finds particular religious institutions transformed not only by reference to their ultimate ontological context, but also by reference to their inclusion in a trans-historical community. He then explores the dimensions of this community and its task vis à vis culture. That task consists of re-contextualizing culture by reference to the ultimate reality. This activity, however, exposes the unity which obtains between the church and the world. We will chart this movement of Niebuhr during the '50's and note his insights into the nature of the church by reference to four of his significant works: Christ and Culture, "The Churches and the Body of Christ," The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, and "The Church Defines Itself in the World."

As we observed in the preceding chapter, the church for Niebuhr exists in two contexts--that penultimate context of culture and the ultimate context of God's Kingdom. We suggested that for Niebuhr, reference to the context of interpretation defined a view of the church as external or internal. The external view of the church analyzes it vis à vis culture, and the internal one, in relationship to

God. But these two contexts are not clearly divisible, and Christ and Culture represents Niebuhr's exploration of ways in which the church has understood them to be related. That exploration produced much insight into the nature of the church and the transforming function of recognition of its ultimate context.

Niebuhr identifies the penultimate context of the church as "culture."

> Culture is the "artificial secondary environment" which man superimposes on the natural. It comprises languages, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organizations, inherited artifacts, technical processes and values.[31]

Culture is a social product of human achievement concerned with temporal and material realization and conservation of a plurality of human values.[32]

The other context of the church is Jesus Christ.[33] Niebuhr recognizes a plurality of interpretations of Jesus Christ, but endeavors to point to that level of unity common to them all. He finds that unity in Jesus' TRANSPARENCY, the fact that he in no way calls attention to himself, but in words and style he points to and presents the

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[31] H. Richard Niebuhr, Christ and Culture (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951, Torchbook edition, 1956), p. 32.

[32] Ibid., pp. 33-37.

[33] Cf. Niebuhr, "The Norm of the Church," loc. cit.

present, gracious consuming rule of God. His love, hope, obedience, faith and humility all point beyond himself to the one God on whom all depend.[34]

Thus the church which is faithful to Jesus Christ likewise points beyond its particular cultural context to God, an activity which invariably incurs the wrath of those whose values derive from culture. It is often accused of indifference, quietism, intolerance, or social irresponsibility precisely when most faithful to its ultimate context.[35]

The tension between the Church's two contexts is thus inescapable, and the church cannot accept uncritically evaluations of itself from without. On the other hand, a peculiar inseparability also exists between the church's two contexts.

Jesus Christ, precisely as transparent to God, also moves towards men manifesting agape towards them.[36]

> Belief in him and loyalty to his cause involves men in the double movement from world to God and from God to world. . . . they [Christians] are forever being challenged to abandon all things for the sake of God; and forever being sent back into the world to

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[34] Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, op. cit., pp. 11-29.

[35] Ibid., pp. 5-9.

[36] Ibid., p. 28.

teach and practice all the things that have been commanded them.[37]

Fidelity to God as revealed in Jesus Christ thus implies a dual attitude towards culture. On the one hand, all that is, is relative; it is finite, transient and incapable of ordering life adequately. It is all absolutely dependent on God. On the other hand, all that is, is good; it is created, sustained and governed by the One whose activity defines value. It is thus worthy of affirmation, participation and protection.

The movement towards God of which Niebuhr speaks is the movement towards recognition of the relativity of all created being--its unworthiness as a source of value. But that movement itself transforms the direction towards utter affirmation of the world as created and given. In the second movement, however, one confronts the issue with which Christ and Culture deals. For when one affirms "All that is, is good" he finds himself affirming culture with ITS values and demands which HE, as finite and good, is obligated to embody. The church is obligated to God-in-Christ and therefore to culture which, nevertheless, comes into conflict with God-in-Christ. Niebuhr's work is to indicate the church's ways of responding to this dilemma. It is NOT a theoretical discourse on the

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[37] Ibid., p. 29.

alternative relationships of church and world; it is rather a discussion of the resolutions of the practical dilemma of authorities faced by the church.[38]

Niebuhr holds up five ways in which the Church has held itself conscious of its dilemma of authorities: Christ Against Culture, Christ of Culture; Christ Above Culture; Christ and Culture in Paradox; and Christ the Transformer of Culture. Niebuhr himself prefers the latter way,[39] but he acknowledges that no conclusive result is forthcoming, that one deals here with a genuine paradox that is irreducible to compact logical expression.[40] The paradox is directly tied to that of the incarnation, for the force of culture's authority derives from God as does the claim of Jesus Christ. That the two often conflict is evident, but how the conflict is possible with each side sustaining a rightful claim to divine sanction is a genuine problem.

In the final chapter of Christ and Culture, Niebuhr elaborates on the nature and function of that community concerned with the relation

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[38] Cf. ibid., pp. 10f.

[39] Cf. reviews by: Shinn, Christianity and Crisis, XI (1951), No. 15, pp. 117-120; Demant, Journal of Theological Studies, n.s., IV (1953), Pt. 1, 153-154; and Hoedemaker, op. cit., p. 42.

[40] Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, op. cit., pp. 230ff.

between these two contexts. In so doing, he elaborates on what we have identified as the third dimension of his concept of the church, its character as a trans-historical community.[41] Here he presents the church as a community in which decisions are made.

The situation in which one decides is SOCIALLY and not individualistically existential.

> . . . the existentialist question is not individualistic; it arises in its most passionate form not in our solitariness but in our fellowship. It is the existential question of social men who have no selfhood apart from their relation to other human selves.[42]

The confrontation with Christ which marks the presence of the church does not happen to us

> . . . apart from a company of witnesses who surround him, point to him, interpret this and that feature of his presence, explain to us the meaning of his words, direct our attention to his relations with the Father and the Spirit.[43]

Knowledge of Christ--and thus of God-in-Christ--is mediated by the

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[41]This fact is generally not noted by many commentators who see this chapter as a jarring interruption to the train of thought previously developed, cf. Shinn, loc. cit., and Demant, loc. cit. They seem to have overlooked the fact that this book is concerned with a problem faced only BY the church, and it is entirely appropriate to attend in the conclusion to the nature of the community which faces this problem.

[42]Niebuhr, Christ & Culture, op. cit., p. 244.

[43]Ibid., p. 245.

company of fellow knowers. It NEVER absolves the individuals of the necessity of decision; rather, the community is the vehicle through which decision is presented to the individual in a way that prohibits arbitrariness and subjectivism. The community presents Christ and not simply a fantasy or projection of desires.

And the community which mediates the faith-decision to the individual is history-long.

> The Christian is a member of a company which has a history of relations to him and to Christ. To be contemporaneous with Christ is to be contemporaneous with one who was present to Augustine as well as to Paul, and is in the presence of the least of his brothers. . . . We are contemporary with men who in their thoughts and actions represent the human race; we are contemporary with mankind in its history, to which the physically dead belong as truly as the biologically existent. . . . we are contemporary with the Church, the company of all Christ's contemporaries. And then we are contemporary with one thing more: with the absolute, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. . . .[44]

The individual existential decision of authorities is thus confronted in and mediated by a multi-dimensional social context which is the church.

Thus he concludes,

> To make our decisions in faith is to make them in view of the fact that no single man or group or historical time is the church; but that there is a church of faith in which we do our partial, relative work and on which we count.[45]

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[44] Ibid., pp. 248f.

[45] Ibid., p. 256.

The concluding chapter of Christ and Culture, then, is a designation of the community in which the believer stands and in which he raises the question of authorities. It is a community constituted by the presence of Jesus Christ, composed of those who witness to him and who complement each other's witness, and bound together by a common loyalty to and trust in God. It includes all Christ's contemporaries, living and dead. It transmits faith by presenting Christ and the existential decision he poses to persons. Individuals and organizations are members, but the church in its wholeness encompasses time and space.

In speaking of this trans-temporal community Niebuhr is not pointing to an ideal state of affairs to be realized "some day," but to the Augustinian notion of the multi-layered density of the present. Memory and hope focus the past and future on the present and inform present decisions. Consequences and possibilities invade the present from both directions. Grateful acknowledgement of one's dependence on the final power sovereign in history is simultaneously grateful reception of the past and the future that are present and a special collegiality with those of the past and future who share the struggle of faith. One is not removed from the flux of temporality into a transcendent dimension. One rather finds his transient present

flooded with colleagues whose witnesses enrich his own. The eschatological community is real in the present. But consciousness of one's participation in this comprehensive community transforms one's view of his religious institutions! The

> . . . common picture of the world and of history, of the common reliance on the government of God, of the common memory of Christ, and the common hope of salvation,[46]

which one shares with colleagues of all times allows one to identify oneself with that larger community and thus to transcend total reliance on one's particular religious organization.

> The societies are its instruments and partial expressions, but no more than that. It is prior to them in power as well as in value. . . . We no longer speak of our societies as the church but as agencies or orders of the church.[47]

Membership in the societies is derivative from membership in the church--the latter mediates the former and not vice versa![48] This is a new insight for Niebuhr, who had previously spoken of the societies as mediators of a participation in the "hidden church." Now, however, he finds that

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[46] H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Churches and the Body of Christ," Friends Intelligencer, CX (1953), p. 622.

[47] Idem.

[48] Idem.

> To realize the actuality of the community is to realize the relative character of the claims any particular society of Christians can make upon us and the necessity of regarding ourselves as related to our societies because we are related to the community of Christ and not vice versa--related to Christ through our societies.[49]

This recontextualization of one's religious organizations does not, however, lead one to despise them; it rather gives them back in abundance.

> We can rejoice in the development of the many societies that are parts of its structure, accept our own particular societies with gratitude and without feelings of inferiority or superiority to other societies, accept with gratitude also these other societies with which and sometimes against which we must work, and go about our business of building up the community through the special and limited services we can perform in this our time and place.[50]

This is perhaps Niebuhr's most emphatic assertion of the priority of the "hidden" church over the Christian religious organizations, and it illustrates how for Niebuhr perception of one's wider context transforms his particular activities. His intention all along has been to stress this priority, but to do so in such a way that participation in the organizations functions to mediate membership in the church of faith; in that way, however, he was forced to posit

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[49] Idem.

[50] Ibid., p. 623.

something like the necessity of such an organization, and this always jarred his sensitivity to radical monotheism: for NO contingent reality could claim necessity. Now, however, he takes the opposite tack and posits the utter priority of the "body of Christ"; membership in the societies is DERIVATIVE from membership in this body. But this raises the opposite question, namely, has he so separated the two that belonging to the societies has no necessary connection to belonging to the community? In earlier works[51] he came close to identifying membership in the two dimensions of the church while yet calling for a clear distinction; here he comes close to separating the membership in the two dimensions while yet calling for their relation. In both cases, however, he intended to assert the primacy of the "church of faith" over particular Christian religious organizations thereby making those organizations utterly significant servants of that church.

In Christ and Culture Niebuhr spoke of the church as that community which transcends particular social manifestations, and in "The Churches and the Body of Christ" he discussed the transforming effect of this community on its ecclesiastical expressions. In The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry Niebuhr combined these

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[51] Niebuhr, "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," loc. cit.

insights and set forth his fullest attempt at a definition of the church and its task in culture. It was followed one year later by an essay elaborating its insights vis à vis the Ecumenical Movement. That essay, regretably unpublished, is "The Church Defines Itself in the World." Taken together, these two comprise Niebuhr's most mature reflection on the question of the church's nature and mission.

PCM grew out of the Study of Theological Education mentioned earlier. The enterprise of theology and theological education takes place in the context of the church. Thus, before the data of his investigation into this enterprise could be interpreted meaningfully, an understanding of that context had to be put forth. But just this understanding was unavailable: no explicit consensus existed in the theological community regarding the nature of the church, yet SOME understanding was presupposed by the process of theological education. Niebuhr thus found it necessary to offer

> . . . a somewhat personal effort to clarify and organize the ideas about the church, ministry and theological education that seem to be "in the air" or that seem to be developing in "the climate of opinion."[52]

As a surveyor of theological seminaries, he finds them operating in a context larger than denominational institutions.

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[52]Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, op. cit., p. xiii.

Initially his findings suggested that

> The context in which theological education is going on is the baffling pluralism of Protestant religious life in the United States and Canada.[53]

Further reflection exhibited a shared community of discourse larger than the denominations, and

> One is tempted to define it as American or Canadian national existence or . . . as "the free society" or as "Western Democracy."[54]

Yet this interpretation does not do justice to the evidence.

> Only one among the schools, and that one unofficially and incidentally, refers in its statement of purpose to "the American Way of life." About half of them, to be sure, define their purpose by reference to a denomination which they serve. However, the other half do not mention denominational ties and even those that do so rarely name the special organization without referring to a wider Church of which the denomination is a part.[55]

Thus theological schools work in the community of the Church in its wholeness,[56] aware, however, that this work must be "grounded" in a particular order.[57]

Curricular evidence of participation in the whole church consists

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[53] Ibid., p. 6.

[54] Ibid., p. 7.

[55] Ibid., p. 9.

[56] Ibid., p. 12.

[57] Cf. ibid., p. 10.

of heavy emphasis on Scripture, church history and theology.

> Thus implicitly and explicitly the denominations in their concern for the education of ministers, and the schools entrusted with the task, make it evident that they think of themselves increasingly as branches or members of a single community, as orders and institutions with special duties or assignments to be carried out in partnership with other branches of one society. The idea of Una Sancta, of One Holy Church is very pervasive despite relatively rare expressions.[58]

A survey of the seminaries thus reveals a widespread conviction of a transcendent community which is only partially expressed in particular organizations and institutions. Evidence of a shared community of discourse and common concerns suggests strongly that this conviction is not illusory but that this transcendent community is a functioning reality.

Yet what is the nature of this social reality? No adequate theological understanding of the church was on hand. Whereas the new consciousness of the reality of the church seemed quite widespread, clarity about the nature, mission, form, matter and relations of the church was conspicuously absent.[59] A host of new resources for understanding the church were on hand, yet their combination

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[58] Ibid., p. 16.

[59] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Why Restudy Theological Education?" Christian Century, LXXI (1954), p. 517; cf. The Purpose of the Church . . ., op. cit., p. 17.

into a "temporary historical synthesis" had not been achieved.[60]

The insights of

> . . . history, the sociology of religion and the theology of culture; and . . . the practical experiments and experiences in ecumenical national, municipal and parish organization of church life. . .[61]

remained to be drawn together into a unified conception which would serve as an organizing image for a theological study.

> For the present the question of what the Church is in act and potency, remains largely unanswered. The problem is new in many ways; at least it is posed in new forms at the present junction of history.[62]

Thus the second finding of the survey of the seminaries was that of an unresolved quest for an understanding of the community within which "pastors, mission boards, bishops, lay leaders and many others"[63] understand themselves to be functioning. The quest "constitutes one of the main concerns of modern theology."[64]

Although no explicit consensus regarding the church was available, Niebuhr nevertheless found many insights about the church

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[60]Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church . . ., op. cit., p. 18.

[61]Idem.

[62]Ibid., p. 18.

[63]Niebuhr, "Why Restudy . . .?" loc. cit., p. 517.

[64]Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church . . ., op. cit., p. 17.

implicit in the enterprise of theological education. He sought to express them by means of "polar analysis." He

> . . . seeks to do justice to the dynamic character of that social reality the Church, by defining certain poles between which it moves or which it represents.[65]

The polarities occur both in the Church's exterior relations (that from which it is distinguished) and its interior relations (that by which it is identified).

The first of the exterior polarities is the Church-Kingdom of God:

> By Church . . . we mean the subjective pole of the objective rule of God. The Church is no more the kingdom of God than natural science is nature or written history the course of human events.[66]

This implies, however, that wherever apprehension of and conscious participation in the Kingdom occurs, there is the Church, and that conscious membership in the Kingdom implies a community.[67] For Niebuhr, the rule of God is absolute and universal; the Church is that human community which acknowledges the divine rule consciously.

On the other hand,

> The Church is not the only human community directed toward the divine reality: its uniqueness lies in its

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[65] Ibid., p. 19.

[66] Idem.

[67] Idem.

> particular relation to that reality, a relation inseparable from Jesus Christ.[68]

Not only historically, but also in perception, Jesus Christ stands at the center of the community disclosing to it the reconciling activity of God which is otherwise unknown.[69] Thus the Church finds itself related to but distinct from other human communities which point to the Ultimate.[70] It is particular among human societies--yet its particular context is significant only as indicator of the universal. Not only subjective consciousness but also the objective reality of which it is conscious identifies the church.

The second external polarity is Church-World. In this case,

> World . . . is not object of the Church as God is. World, rather, is companion of the church . . . the community to which the Church addresses itself with its gospel. . . .[71]

Niebuhr defines "world" as the human community which, though it lives before God, does not know itself to be known and loved by God. On the other hand, "the world is the community of those who are

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[68] Ibid., p. 20.

[69] Idem.

[70] Ibid., p. 21.

[71] Ibid., p. 26.

occupied with temporal things."[72] This means that there is possibility of either alliance or enmity between Church and world, depending on the latter's use of "temporal things." But in either case, the church is both related to and distinguished from "the world."

Within the church, Niebuhr finds four additional polarities: Institution-Community, unity-plurality, locality-universality, and Protestant-Catholic.

Concerning the first, Niebuhr finds that as a social reality, the Church must be described as both institution and community, two dimensions that can be neither identified nor separated.

> . . . no community can exist without some institutions that give it form, boundaries, discipline and the possibilities of expression and common action. On the other hand, no institution can long exist without some common mind and drive that expresses and defines itself in institutions.[73]

Each is capable of complementing or contradicting the other, but wherever there is Church, both dimensions are present. This polarity opposes both the Protestant temptation towards negation of the institution manifested by Brunner, and the Catholic temptation towards idolatry of the institution. Niebuhr's Calvinism produces a two-fold attitude towards the institution: it is revered as a created and

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[72] Idem.

[73] Ibid., p. 22.

good part of the church, yet it is suspect as a corruptible, corrupted and corrupting part which must continually be in process of conversion and in tension with the movement and spirit of the community. Much the same can be said of the community: "The Church as community can enliven but also stultify the Church as institution."[74]

Concerning the second, the Church

> . . . is, in the inescapable New Testament figure, a body with many members none of which is the whole in miniature but in each of which the whole is symbolized. Every national church, every denomination, every local church, every temporal church order can call itself church by virtue of its participation in the whole; yet every one is only a member needing all the others in order to be truly itself and in order to participate in the whole.[75]

Niebuhr's brand of ecumenism, then, does not consist in seeking institutional mergers, but creative and complementary dialogue within a common frame of reference that honors and preserves differences of emphasis.

Concerning the third, Niebuhr stresses the inseparability of local and universal church. For the Church is constituted by the presence of Christ. But

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[74] Idem.

[75] Ibid., p. 24.

> Jesus Christ cannot be there without bringing with him the whole company of his brothers, who have heard the Word of God and kept it, who were not created without the Word. . . . The localized Church implies the universal, but the universal no less implied the local; without localization, without becoming concrete in a specific occasion, it does not exist.[76]

One cannot belong to the church "in general" who does not belong to the church in particular. But neither does particularity mean isolation: it is through committed participation in a local congregation that one finds himself in the company of all the saints and martyrs, prophets and patriarchs. The significance of the particular is precisely its transparency to the universal; the significance of the universal is its witness to Jesus Christ. And the significance of Jesus Christ is his witness to God.

Finally, the church includes the protestant and catholic poles. Niebuhr does not mean here simply the institutional expressions of Christianity that have taken shape since the Reformation. He has in mind the basic principles which find expression IN the institutions. The protestant emphasis is

> the principle of protest against every tendency to confuse the symbol with what it symbolizes and the subject with the object. . . . It protests against every

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[76] Idem.

> effort to bring the Infinite into the finite, the transcendent into the immanent, the Eternal into the temporal.[77]

On the other hand,

> The principle of catholicity--as the principle of incarnation rather than the principle of universality--is as much an ingredient of churchliness as is the principle of protest.[78]

The infinite expresses itself within the finite: this is the catholic principle, and without it the Christian gospel is hollow idealism, pronouncing only judgment and never redemption.[79]

That which unifies the apparently contradictory principles is the sovereignty of God. A community with faith in divine sovereignty will express both movements, on the one hand relativizing all finite beings as unworthy of ultimate trust and on the other, pointing to all finite beings as transparent to that Infinite One who is alone in control of history. Thus Protestantism and Catholicism are institutional manifestations of the dialectic of divine sovereignty.

This discussion of the nature of the church is at once most gratifying and curiously unsatisfactory. Its merit is to have so clearly specified the necessary components of an adequate conception

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[77] Ibid., p. 25.

[78] Idem.

[79] Idem.

of the church; its defect is its failure to weave those components together into a unity. Yet this was not the purpose of Niebuhr, and he recognized the limited nature of his task. As he says, "For the present the question what the Church is in act and potency, remains largely unanswered."[80] His work takes a step in the direction of providing that answer. But it is not the last step.

In its nature, Niebuhr finds the church to be a polar reality; in its mission, however, he seeks and finds unity.

> The question is whether there is one end beyond the many objectives as there is one Church in the many churches. . . . The question of the ultimate objective of the whole Church and of the seminaries in the Church does not reduce questions about proximate ends to questions about means, but it poses the problem of the final unifying consideration that modifies all the special strivings.[81]

For Niebuhr the purpose of the church is to transform man's relationship to the context in which he operates.

> Is not the result of all these debates and the content of the confessions or commandments of all the authorities this: that no substitution can be found for the definition of the goal of the church as the increase among men of the love of God and neighbor?[82]

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[80] Ibid., p. 18.

[81] Ibid., pp. 28 f.

[82] Ibid., p. 31.

This is NOT two distinct purposes; love of God and of neighbor are intricately bound. No one can value the neighbor without valuing that on which both he and the neighbor are finally dependent; nor can one value that ultimate One without valuing that which this One produces.

Man always exists in the context of God and neighbor, but his relationship towards them is usually defensive. The purpose of the church is to advance another possibility. It is thus not only to expose man's actual operating contexts, but also to expose them as able to be loved. The conversion which the church seeks to further, then, is not simply a matter of perception, but also one of response.

Niebuhr's explanation of "love," "God," and "neighbor" in this chapter comprises some of the most poignant prose in contemporary theology.[83] While no attempt is made here to summarize the passage, one feature might be noted: its dialectic character. For "love" is described as comprising both attraction and awe for the other; "God" appears as both giver and taker of all that is; and "neighbor" is both Everyman and Thou.

To fulfill this task, then, the church must always remain dynamic, moving from one to another facet of its mission coming finally to rest only in its eternal wholeness of which God alone knows.

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[83] Ibid., pp. 34-39.

Fulfilling this purpose, however, the Church meets four persistent perversions, each of which stems from a failure to distinguish properly between proximate and ultimate contexts. Denominationalism (confusion of a part of the church with the Church in its wholeness),[84] ecclesiasticism (confusion of the church with the Lord to whom it points),[85] Biblicism (elevation of the book instead of God witnessed to in the book),[86] and Christism (worship of Jesus Christ instead of God)[87] persistently confront the church as temptations to be rejected. In each case, the perversion derives from a failure of transparency. Symbols are mistaken for that which they symbolize; they become opaque and thus idolatrous.

Niebuhr suggests that the Protestant principle is a permanent objection to precisely this opacity and a persistent pointer to that which can never be exhausted in its expressions. Yet this is the way of iconoclasm and finally, anarchy. Niebuhr recognizes this implication of a consistently negative approach and holds the catholic principle of incarnation to be its necessary corrective.

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[84] Ibid., p. 40.

[85] Ibid., pp. 41 f.

[86] Ibid., p. 43.

[87] Ibid., pp. 44 f.

Niebuhr is concerned in this study not only with the church in general, but also with the ministry in particular. And, in examining this issue, his findings were similar to those regarding the church:

> . . . the contemporary Church is confused about the nature of the ministry. Neither ministers nor the schools that nurture them are guided today by a clear-cut, generally accepted conception of the office of the ministry, though such an idea may be emerging.[88]

Sociologists have attempted to account for this vagueness in terms of the absorption of ministerial functions by other social agents or in terms of the church's failure to stay apace with the culture.[89]

> But what critics who point to these reasons for the loss of certainty seem too often to forget is that the Church is never only a function of a culture nor ever only a supercultural community; that the problem of its ministers is always how to remain faithful servants of the Church in the midst of cultural change and yet to change culturally so as to be true to the Church's purpose in new situations.[90]

Niebuhr proposes to understand the minister as PASTORAL DIRECTOR.

> His first function is that of building or "edifying" the church; he is concerned in everything that he does to bring into being a people of God who as a Church will

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[88] Ibid., p. 50.

[89] Ibid., pp. 55 f.

[90] Ibid., p. 57.

> serve the purpose of the Church in the local community and the world.[91]

The presupposition for this view is that the Church itself acts as the minister in society increasing among men the love of God and neighbor, and the professional minister is the servant of this community who directs its service.[92] In this conception, the community which is served takes on a new dimension of importance in relation to the ministerial call and ministerial authority. He is one whose life is devoted to the service of the church.

> The question is not whether the ministry will reflect the institutional forms of leadership in the world but whether it will reflect these with the difference that Christian faith and church life require; whether, in short, the minister will remain "man of God" despite the fact that he is now a director instead of a ruler.[93]

The advantage of this conception of the ministry is that it allows the clergy to understand time spent on administrative and organizational tasks to be directly involved in carrying out the work of the church in the world. Its obvious danger is institutionalism and professionalism, but, as Niebuhr continually stresses, the cure for these ills is not the abolition of institutions and professionals, but in

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[91] Ibid., p. 82.

[92] Ibid., p. 83.

[93] Ibid., p. 90; cf. James Dittes, The Church in the Way (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967).

directing these given realities outwards towards real needs of men who are viewed as men-in-relation-to-God.[94]

Niebuhr demonstrated once more the transforming effect of a context in an unpublished but highly significant essay written in 1957.[95] It marks his explicit critique of the direction taken by current attempts, primarily within the Ecumenical Movement, to define

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[94] Cf. Van A. Harvey, "On Separating Hopes from Illusions," Motive, XXVI, No. 2 (November, 1965), pp. 4-7. The term "pastoral director" as a description of the role of the modern clergyman has not met with universal approval: indeed, European members of the W.C.C. consultation on Theological Education "took violent exception to it."--R.E.O., review of The Purpose of the Church . . ., Encounter, XVII (1956), p. 395. Yet the tone of American reviewers of the work has been decidedly favorable--not, perhaps, to the phrase, but to the thinking that lies behind it. It seems, for them, to answer the need for a conception which honors both the institutional and the "spiritual" dimensions of the clergyman's task. R.E.O. suggests in his review that "bishop" might have been a more acceptable term had it not already been usurped by another function in the church. Cf. Reviews by Franklin, Japan Christian Quarterly, XXIII (1957), pp. 109-117; Handy, The Review of Religion, XXI (1957), pp. 210-213; Muelder, Journal of Bible and Religion, XXIV (1956), p. 281; and Blizzard, Religious Education, LII (1957), p. 70.

Perhaps the major problem with the term "pastoral director" is its stress on administration and suggestion that in itself such activity is worthwhile. Given the bureaucratic weight of American religious institutions, Niebuhr might better have expressed his intention by selecting a term which indicated more clearly the transparency of administrative work. For his point is that this work enables the community to carry out its purpose, not that it is meritorious in itself. He might have referred back to his 1925 advocacy of a new monasticism and selected such a term as "prior" or "abbott" to convey this meaning.

[95] Cf. Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 139f.

the church.

According to Niebuhr, ANY definition involves decisions of practical and theoretical reason which are not based simply on self-evident data but which represent genuine but not arbitrary choice.

> Among the decisions that are involved in or precede theoretic definitions are those about purpose, about distinction and about positive relation or context.[96]

Contemporary thought, Niebuhr observes, has chosen the purpose of seeking unity, and has thus chosen to regard the church in distinction from the world and in positive relation to Jesus Christ.[97] For Niebuhr this is an abhorrent confusion of priorities. But as in all definitions, certain consequences follow, and these may lead one to doubt the adequacy of the original decisions. This is in fact the case with the definition of the church.

For distinction of the church from the world leads to

> . . . the tendency to ignore or deprecate the "worldly" character of the church and the "churchly" character of the world. We seek to find the essential marks of the church in elements that are peculiar to it when distinguished from world; we regard those elements in its phenomenal appearance that relate it positively to the world as inessential or as foreign and deleterious.[98]

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[96] Niebuhr, "The Church Defines Itself . . .," op. cit., p. 2.

[97] Ibid., p. 4.

[98] Ibid., p. 5.

The ultimate outcome of this decision is that the church so defined is "An ideal church, an eschatological church, invisible to our times."[99] Furthermore, the work of Jesus Christ comes to be limited to the Christian community, and the obedience and faith existing outside this community is ignored. This turning in on itself is the prescription for idolatry.

In contrast to prevailing opinion, Niebuhr takes his stand--confessionally--in pursuit of the unity, NOT of the church or any other human community, but of GOD.[100] He regards church unity to be a gift to be received gratefully but not necessarily to be pursued exclusively. For it is a relative gift.

The basic distinction which identifies the church is the distinction from God.[101] The church is that part of the human community which knows itself to be non-divine, thus unworthy of ultimate loyalty and trust. It thus has a unique relation of detachment towards its own life.

The context in which Niebuhr would define the church is "the context of the created world and especially of humanity."[102] This

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[99] Idem.

[100] Ibid., p. 7.

[101] Idem.

[102] Idem.

means that any suspicion of "eliteness" on the part of the church is removed.

The church as a part of humanity shares in the finitude and sin of the world completely, and yet "has begun to believe, to hope, and to love God."[103] There is no qualitative difference between church and world. The church merely "recognizes him (Jesus Christ) as sent from God to redeem the world."[104]

> We are not Christ. But we identify ourselves with the Christ who has identified himself with man and mankind. We are related to the Christ who is related to the world; and who is not related to the world through us but by his own action.[105]

Niebuhr ends his essay with a plea to recover the traditional decision to stand as church before the trinitarian God. The rest of the essay has shown the import of that stance: when the church sees itself in light of its ultimate relation, then its non-divine character is not only exposed, but transformed as the whole world becomes the church's equal, and the church becomes the world's representative.

We now proceed to examine more closely the nature of this transformation as we inquire into Niebuhr's concept of conversion.

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[103] Ibid., p. 7.

[104] Idem.

[105] Idem.

C. The Two Views of the Church

It is not our claim that in the 1950's Niebuhr suddenly happened on a way of relating the two views of the church unlike anything he had thought of before. His conversionism was present to varying degrees throughout his work; nevertheless it received an emphasis and clarification in this decade that warrants regarding it as the dominant motif of the time. Historically, however, conversionism had both "ancestors" and "descendents."

In his autobiographical reflections for Christian Century in 1960 Niebuhr wrote that amid all the changes of direction in his career were three basic convictions that remained unaltered. The first was the sovereignty of God, the second, the sinfulness of man, and

> . . . the other was the understanding that trust in the ground of being is a miraculous gift. How it is possible to rely on God . . . this remains a miraculous gift. It is the human impossibility which has been made possible, as has also the enlistment of these unlikely beings, these human animals ourselves, in his cause, the cause of universal creation and universal redemption.[106]

Somehow in an inexplicable way, the ambiguous human community with its corrupted and corrupting relations is intruded upon and

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[106] Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," loc. cit., pp. 248f.

TRANSFORMED into that reality described by theology as the Body of Christ.

Something like this process of conversion was demonstrated in his essay of 1935, "The Question of the Church" wherein he exemplified the critical appropriation of "external" views of the church. Niebuhr never denies that the church has behaved in the manner her critics describe. Instead he re-contextualizes their criticisms and sees in them not the judgment of man but of God. This means, however, that the church has been convicted of infidelity: it has been shown its complicity with society and its impotence before social hostility and forced to resume its authentic posture--that of repentance. In light of its ultimate context, then, the church has erred in identifying "too much rather than too little with the world in which it lives."[107] The upshot of the re-contextualization in no way diminishes the force of external critiques, nor does it somehow de-institutionalize the reality under observation--indeed it intensifies them by adding a dimension of ultimacy which they lack. But it utterly transforms their meaning. Now the external exposé is no longer occasion for ecclesiastical disestablishment but for churchly

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[107] Niebuhr, "The Question of the Church," op. cit., p. 11.

repentance. And this is the authentic posture of the church witnessing to the source of its salvation in the grace of God.

In the mid-40's Niebuhr gave further attention to the concept of conversion. In "Towards a New Other-Worldliness" he indicated that conversion does not have to do with transformation from a this-worldly to an other-worldly reality. Human existence has two dimensions, but Christianity does not have to do with the transition from one to the other.

It is concerned with the transformation of this world into a

> . . . kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, but it is equally interested in the reformation of the other world in which we also live into a land of grace and glory. It assumes a two-world life on the part of man and its proper task has been the conversion of this dual existence rather than the reduction of life to one or the other. The Gospel is not a plan either for building the kingdom of God upon earth nor for attaining blessedness in a realm of spirit. It is always the double announcement that the Word has become flesh and the mortal put on immortality; it always carries with it the double injunction to seek the things that are above and to go into all the world. Yet it does not consist of two proclamations; for it speaks of one God who redeems a life lived in two worlds.[108]

Concerning the church, this means that one cannot simply assume that its "movemental" dimension bears the notes of the church while its "institutional" dimension does not. The one may

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[108] Niebuhr, "Towards a New Otherworldliness," loc. cit., pp. 78 f.

be invisible, global and other-worldly, but it nonetheless needs transformation. Furthermore, the visible institutional aspect of the church is capable of conversion to ITS authentic status.

Conversion as it is described here thus has to do with something other than an alteration in the two-dimensional social reality. It has rather to do with the context in which one perceives that reality and by which one interprets its significance. Reference to the church vis à vis society yields one interpretation; reference to the church vis à vis God, quite another, although the facts remain the same in both views.

Conversion is from observation to faith. But that which is converted, if that be the case, is not the church but the viewer. Yet, as we have noted, transformation of faith precipitates a transformation of activity and therefore leads to an alteration of the social reality in which one participates. Even so, that transformation does not alter the basic structure of the church as a two-dimensional social reality; it rather brings that created goodness to fulfillment.

The two views of the church, then, are related by an alteration in the interpretation given the data. And this again exposes the scandal of faith--precisely THIS ambiguous human community is the People of God. The scandal precisely parallels that of radical

monotheism: the Mysterious One on whom man is totally dependent is regarded as gracious father.

The issue at stake between the two views of the church in this schema is whether the social reality represents the action of man alone or whether, within and through and despite the acts of men, there is in the church the activity of God reconciling the world to Himself through vicarious suffering.[109]

For example in one of the very essays in which Niebuhr makes his most vivid distinction between the "hidden church" and the "churches in sight," he posits the continual transformation of the latter.

> Our Christian churches, so-called, are like ourselves, just human entities on which God has taken mercy and which He is converting to himself. In them and through them we sin and falter as we do in and through our families and our state. But in and through them we can serve the Church of our faith as we can nowhere else.[110]

But what is the nature of this transformation if it is neither simply a matter of exchanging subjective viewpoints when looking at the church nor is it simply exchanging one for the other dimension of the church's life? How are subjective and objective conversion related?

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[109]Cf. Niebuhr, "War as the Judgment of God," loc. cit.

[110]Niebuhr, "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," op. cit., p. 116.

The issue is given its fullest exposition in Christ and Culture of 1951. Three basic theological convictions underly this position: (1) emphasis on the creative activity of God and Christ-in-God;[111] (2) a concept of the fall which candidly recognizes the corruption of man without regarding man and matter as evil; and (3)

> . . . a view of history that holds that to God all things are possible in a history that is fundamentally not a course of merely human events but always a dramatic interaction between God and man.[112]

This view candidly acknowledges the sinful activities of men and institutions, but does not, for that reason, seek their negation or destruction.

> Christ is seen as the converter of man in his culture and society, not apart from these, for there is no nature without culture and no turning of men from self and idols to God save in society.[113]

Niebuhr did not share his brother's notion of "moral man and immoral society." He rather held that both man and society are recipient of divine transformation. "This is what human culture can be--a transformed human life in and to the glory of God."[114]

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[111] Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, op. cit., p. 192.

[112] Ibid., p. 194.

[113] Ibid., p. 43.

[114] Ibid., p. 196.

It is not, however, as if culture in itself were evil. A wholly negative assessment of institutions characterizes the dualist, but not the conversionist.[115] They retain a valid place in the order of creation, although as fallen they are "warped, twisted and misdirected."[116] Their sin is basically "moral and personal, not physical and metaphysical."[117] The change that takes place in conversion, then, is only secondarily a change in physical or metaphysical shape of society; basically it is a change in the aim or direction of culture. That is, the alteration which must be made is in the consciousness of the participant in culture; once he held that the divine governance of culture was hostile and punitive and to be avoided; now he sees it as gracious providence to be sought. He does not rely wholly on future eschatological fulfillment and ignore the present, but he also has confidence in present possibility of divine renewal. History is no longer simply a closed sequence of events but is rather transparent to the working of the divine will.

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[115] E. J. Beker only recognizes one side of the dialectic of divine sovereignty in Niebuhr's thought and thus misses this point. Cf. E. J. Beker, "The Sovereignty of God in the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr," Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift, XV (1960), pp. 116f.

[116] Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, op. cit., p. 194.

[117] Idem.

The transformation here described is a transformation of contexts and thus, by our earlier definition, of viewpoints. But it is not simply a subjective alteration, for the difference in interior perception works itself out in exterior manifestations. For the essentially good institution has been corrupted; its need is for re-direction towards its authentic aim; and this aim becomes visible when particular historical realities and events become transparent to the divine activity. When that activity is perceived, then men have a different context in which to respond, and their action takes on a different quality.[118]

An external view of the church is one which regards the church in the context of human culture. But in times of conversion, that context receives transparency to the divine sovereignty, and when seen in this ultimate context, the church takes on a new dimension of significance. Theological or "internal" views attempt to articulate this dimension, but fail when they convey the impression that their object is other than that reality described by the external view. This new perception does not alter the facts of the church's relation to its penultimate context--the hard facts of the external

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[118]Cf. H. Richard Niebuhr, The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

view remain valid--but it transforms the significance of those facts. What comes to light in conversion is: precisely THIS social reality with THESE human and cultural relations is the chosen instrument of God, the Body of Christ with many members. Perception of that significance may, however, occasion a redirection of the activity of the church, but it does not alter the structure of its relation to society.

Basically this is a shift in perception which, Niebuhr says, occurs time and again.[119] But that shift has its consequences: now the particular organizational forms and activities take on a new significance. Now they no longer require defense. They are relative and secondary realities aimed at serving a cause beyond themselves. They are flexible and always ready for a new shaping whenever it becomes apparent that the cause can be better served in other ways. They are relativized--detached from the normal frantic proclivity of institutions to preserve themselves. And now they are engaged--plunged into the tasks demanded by service to the cause. The significance of the daily tasks of the societies now has a dimension of transcendent importance which permits full participation in the

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[119]Cf. Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," op. cit., p. 106, for an exploration of Niebuhr's epistemological Christology.

so-called trivia. Now nothing appears too menial or trifling to be undertaken with vigor. It all serves the Lord of history. Thus the consequences of conversion take visible shape in the organization of the church. But the particular shaping is secondary, a response to the GIFT of conversion which can never be taken for granted but must be continually received.

Thus not simply individuals are "converted," but so also is their association, the church. It is not converted from a social to an ideal reality, from a human to a divine work, from a static to a dynamic entity, from an institution to a community, from a secular to a religious body. The church always already HAS both pairs of contrasting elements within itself, and its penultimate relations, while misdirected, are NOT instrinsically evil. The conversion which takes place is in the context in which or the aim towards which it moves: the shift is from orientation towards society to orientation-towards-God-and-from-God-back-to-society. The immediate penultimate socio-temporal context of the church becomes transparent to the eternal, and the church sees itself not simply engaged in human activity but in serving the will of God.

The relationship between this concept of conversion and Niebuhr's concept of revelation indicated previously may now be indicated. Conversion, for Niebuhr, is the subjective appropriation

of the event of revelation.[120] It expresses the implications, the embodiment, the internalization of revelation. Revelation discloses the Christian paradigm--conversion is the application of that paradigm.[121] Both, however, are continual repetitive processes which occur not simply to individuals in their isolation but to men in their society. Revelation and conversion occur in the church, but they also occur in every human society.[122] In the church, however, they appear in relation to the religious dimension of life.

There is nothing utopian or eschatological in Niebuhr's conversionism. He does not speak of the Church eventually coming into final fulfillment as the triumphant people of God. Rather, he speaks of the continual impingement of the eschatological community on the present church militant, breaking open its perversions and reductionisms and idolatries to self-conscious participation in the redemptive activity of God.[123]

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[120]Cf. Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, op. cit., p. 121.

[121]Ibid., pp. 109-137.

[122]Cf. Niebuhr, "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," op. cit.

[123]Hoedemaker, op. cit., pp. 154 f. points to a "basic unclarity as to the relation between the system of being and the context of history. Both are reference points for an analysis of the self and its faith, and as such they both function in Niebuhr" (p. 155).

The context in which the church operates does not shift; rather, it becomes VISIBLE in conversion. The church, as all human society, exists always in the comprehensive context of the society of being, and within that society, she exists in numerous penultimate contexts. Her problem is the attempt to understand herself and to order her life solely in terms of her penultimate relations. This inevitably leads to idolatry, frustration and suffering. In moments of revelation or conversion, the church understands that she exists in the universal community of being as an inclusive society whose role it is to assume representative responsibility for all that is. She appears as the pioneer, pastor and apostle of all creation.[124] Her activities show an impact far greater than the immediate situation, but they also impact that situation. The structuring of her life

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He is correct in observing that Niebuhr nowhere makes clear this distinction. Yet we find Niebuhr to have provided the resources for clarifying this confusion, and in fact, not to have been confused himself. He refers to the eschatological community which is a context of particular religious institutions; but this remains a penultimate context which is itself merely a member of the community of being which is under the sovereignty of God. Niebuhr does not equate history and being or the ultimate and the penultimate. But he does observe that the penultimate context of the church is much wider in time and space than is normally supposed.

[124] Cf. Niebuhr, "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," op. cit.

becomes governed by consideration of the ultimate context of her operation. And analyses of her function and nature within the particular situation find their place WITHIN and as parts of those analyses which express her ultimate relations.

Once this became clear, then Niebuhr's fear of sociological analyses of the church vanished. This is particularly evident from his enthusiastic endorsement of Gustafson's TEV, a book clearly written about the church as a human community which analyzed its interior order and exterior relations in the context of human communities. But he never prejudiced the case about the church's ultimate relations; he never claimed that the human community was the ultimate context of the church, only that it was a SIGNIFICANT one. This, Niebuhr liked:

> . . . in this book Dr. Gustafson has written the first real sociology of the church. . . . It has corrected for me many of my misapprehensions. I think it presents us with a new beginning for self-understanding in the church.[125]

Niebuhr's theory of conversion provided the basis for a positive use of sociology by theology; yet it remained for Gustafson to demonstrate that use in practice. We shall return to this matter in our conclusion.

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[125] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Dust Jacket Introduction," Treasure in Earthen Vessels, by James M. Gustofson (New York: Harper and Row, 1961).

CHAPTER VI

DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY AND HUMAN SOCIALITY

We have now completed our exposition of Niebuhr's journey through four decades of wrestling with the problem of bringing into relationship two apparently opposing views of the church. We have noted that his resolutions to the problem moved from exclusive focus on the object viewed to concentration on the subject viewing and finally on the context-within-which subject and object are interpreted. In each case, Niebuhr advocated a joining of the two views, but not quite as co-equals. As a churchman he was not concerned to achieve a "higher synthesis" of views, but to make available to the church the valid and valuable insights of secular examinations of her life. In the process of wrestling with this problem, Niebuhr turned up a wealth of insights about the church, both in regard to its internal composition and its relations with culture. He began with the reality of the religious institution and moved from there to examine the Christian "movement" and the community which exists among those in this "movement." All three dimensions are inescapably involved in the church; in terms of priority, however, the dimension of movement

takes precedence for Niebuhr. Participation in the movement of radical monotheism both necessitates social structures to give it expression, and leads one to awareness of a trans-temporal community of colleagues whose similar journey informs one's own. Furthermore, awareness of that community relativizes one's own visible social structure and yet requires that one honor that structure as transparent to the community which remains "eschatological," the Body of Christ. In all three dimensions, the dynamic of human "togetherness" plays a negligible role. When Niebuhr speaks of human community, he speaks of it in ontological rather than psychological terms. Nothing could have been further from his concept of the church than concentration on group dynamics. Niebuhr saw the church in its larger social relations as a part of the human community whose aim within that community was service to that community through increasing its love of God and neighbor. Thus Niebuhr's concept of the church was developed in close dialogue with the events and moods of the times in which he wrote, and we have attempted to show how they emerged out of those concerns.

At this point we propose to end as we began: with a contextual look at the wider scope of Niebuhr's thought, this time, however, concentrating on those persistent themes which have emerged as he pursued his thought about the church. They have to do with the role

of faith as it makes its way in culture. First, in order to appreciate the inevitability of such a role and the impossibility of divorcing faith from culture, we will examine the social nature of man and faith according to Niebuhr. Then we will look at the impact of faith on culture and conclude with observations concerning the impact of culture on faith. Following this look, we will move in the next chapter to some concluding remarks about Niebuhr's work on this problem and its relevance to the contemporary theological and ecclesiastical milieu.

A. Social Man and Faith

That paradigmatic concept by which Niebuhr understands the self is not that of rational being or self-legislator. He finds the emerging concept to be that of the self as social:

> . . . many lines of inquiry have converged on the recognition that the self is fundamentally social, in this sense, that it is a being which not only knows itself in relation to other selves but exists as a self only in that relation.[1]

The social psychology of e.g. G.H. Mead, the existentialist

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[1] H. Richard Niebuhr, The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 71. The form of this book is that used by Niebuhr in his Robertson Lectures at the University of Glasgow in 1960 and some of its content also was used as the Earl Lectures at the Pacific School of Religion in 1962.

philosophy of e.g. Martin Buber and the sociologists and anthropologists who maintain the priority of communities over contract societies all agree that the self is born and reared in the womb of society.[2] This does not mean, however, that one lives only in interaction with other isolated individuals. Analysis of the phenomenon of conscience points to more than isolated encounters or a generalized other.[3] Rather, the self exists in response

> . . . to others who as Thou's are members of a group in whose interactions constancies are present in such a way that the self can interpret present and future action upon it. It can respond to the meaning of present action because such action is a part of a total action, something which means the total action or derives its meaning from that whole.[4]

One's categories of thought thus derive from the experience of a continuing community through which they are mediated.

Niebuhr's basic ethical concept--responsibility--is social through and through. For it analyzes the action of an agent

> . . . as response to an action upon him in accordance with his interpretation of the latter action and with

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[2] Ibid., pp. 72 f.

[3] Cf. "The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience," Journal of Philosophy, XLII (1945), pp. 352-359.

[4] Ibid., p. 65.

> his expectation of response to his response; and all of this in a continuing community of agents.[5]

But the sociality of the self is not simply the inescapable presence of other individuals and/or groups. This sociality has a triadic nature in that it includes relationship to a third reality on the part of both I and Thou:

> When the Thou is present to me as a knower, it is present as the one that knows not only me but at least one other; and it knows me as knowing not only the Thou but something besides it. This encounter of I and Thou takes place, as it were, always in the presence of a third, from which I and Thou are distinguished and to which they also respond.[6]

Man always exists in a direct relation to nature as well as to other selves, and this third term grants him limited freedom from determination by society OR by natural events;[7] one becomes a self in maintaining the relationship of responsiveness and accountability in both directions.[8] Furthermore, man and men exist in relationship to a cause which is both personal and transcendental.[9]

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[5] Ibid., p. 65.

[6] Ibid., p. 79.

[7] Niebuhr, "The Gift of the Catholic Vision," loc. cit., p. 515.

[8] Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, op. cit., pp. 81f.

[9] Ibid., pp. 84f.; cf. "Christianity and the Social Problem," loc. cit., p. 281.

To summarize, the self who sets out to view the church does so as a social being inescapably related to other selves, to natural events, and to the personal and transcendent CAUSE which they serve and by which they understand.

Analysis of the self's sociality thus reveals the internal viewpoint of the theologian to be a matter, not only of a particular community of faith, but also of the cause to which that community is directed. In the case of the church, that cause is universal. This means that he is within a particular community with a universal cause, and he is charged with responsibility in and to both.

Like the self, so also does FAITH have a triadic social character. Man can no more stand outside a relationship of faith than he can outside of a historical community.[10] For "faith" is the structure of belief, trust and loyalty (fides, fiducia and fidelitas) that characterizes every life:

> It is a curious and inescapable fact about our lives . . . that we cannot live without a cause, without some object of devotion, some center of worth, something on which we rely for our meaning. In this sense all men have faith because they are men and cannot help

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[10] Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, op. cit., pp. 37f.; cf. "Faith in Gods and in God," op. cit., pp. 116ff.

> themselves, just as they must and do have some knowledge of their world, though this knowledge be erroneous.[11]

If faith is a universal human phenomenon, then its structure is likewise characteristic of human existence as such, and the distinction between Christian (or monotheistic) and other faith is not its structure but elsewhere.

For Niebuhr, faith as belief, trust and loyalty is a social relation and not an individual attribute. It implies an other--a Thou--who is believed and trusted and to whom I am loyal. But the relation is extremely complex:

> Faith as I know it in my common human life seems first of all to be a kind of double relation between the I and the Thou in which I trust in thy loyalty to speak the truth to me as Thou seest the truth and in which I trust in thy faithfulness, not only to me but to something else.[12]

In faith the self is related by loyalty to an other; he is related by trust in the loyalty of the other to the self; but he also trusts that the other is related by loyalty to that cause to which the self is also loyal.[13]

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[11] Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God," ibid., p. 118; cf. "The Triad of Faith," Andover Newton Bulletin, XLVII (1954), pp. 6 f.

[12] Niebuhr, "The Triad of Faith," ibid., p. 3.

[13] H. Richard Niebuhr, "On the Nature of Faith," Religious Experience and Truth: A Symposium, ed. Sidney Hook (New York: New York University Press, 1961), pp. 99 f.

Finally, he is related to the cause by confidence:

> I somehow try to trust the cause, that which transcends us both as that which will not let him down or deceive him and which will not deceive me or let me down.[14]

The community of faith in which one stands, then, is not simply constituted by relationships of loyalty and trust and belief among its members, but also by relationship to a common cause which transcends the community itself.[15] That is, every community has its object of devotion, its cause, that center from which it derives meaning and value. Every community has its God, and yet that reality appears AS god only within the community. "Faith and God belong together . . . ."[16]

The standpoint of the theologian "within" the Chritian community is thus a standpoint within the faith-relations by which the community lives. Only from within that viewpoint can theology understand the God of the Christian faith.[17]

But Niebuhr does not wish to claim a special supernatural gnosis for members of the Christian community. That One whom the

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[14] Niebuhr, "The Triad of Faith," loc. cit., p. 4.

[15] Ibid., pp. 5 f.

[16] Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, op. cit., p. 37.

[17] Ibid., p. 35.

Christian community knows in faith as God is known by other communities as a void or enemy.[18] Yet "within" the realm of faith in this One, the theologian accords a different meaning and value to that which he perceives, since the basis of his valuation is the Lord of Heaven and Earth.[19]

Nor does Niebuhr claim that Christian faith is a human achievement. Confidence in and loyalty to the final power is not something which one adopts by mere fiat. For Niebuhr, this faith HAPPENS in history:

> We say that it is given, that it has been given, that it is being given, and that when it is received very profound consequences follow.[20]

This "happening" is related to the human experience of frustration, to rational struggle, to moral guilt and to spiritual insight;

> But for most men another element is involved--the concrete meeting with other men who have received this faith, and the concrete meeting with Jesus Christ . . . we confront in the event of Jesus Christ the presence of that last power which brings to apparent nothingness the life of the most loyal man. Here we confrcnt the slayer, and here we become aware that

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[18] Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God," op. cit., pp. 122 ff.

[19] Cf. Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, op. cit., pp. 16 ff., 32 f.; "The Center of Value," op. cit., p. 112.

[20] Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God," op. cit., p. 125.

> this slayer is the life-giver. He does not put to shame those who trust in him.[21]

The one who writes within the perspective of the Christian faith, then, does so in confidence and loyalty to Being. The event of Jesus Christ functions for him as paradigmatic for the interpretation of all things. Such a perspective has dialectic consequences.

On the one hand, it is a position of inescapable particularity. The viewer operates out of the historical experiences and the faith of one community that exists as one among many. His language, his thought patterns, his memory and his hopes are informed by one strand of human history: that of Western Christendom.

On the other hand, however, that particularity is transparent to that which is NOT particular: to That Which Is. Insofar as one does in fact participate in the history and faith of the Christian community, he participates first of all in the whole community of being. The former exists only to mediate the latter.[22]

In terms of knowledge, membership in a community which is radically monotheistic has a dual function:

> It removes the taboos which surround our intellectual life, making some subjects too holy to be inquired into and some too dangerous for us to venture into.

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[21] Ibid., pp. 124 f.

[22] Cf. Niebuhr, "The Gift of the Catholic Vision," loc. cit.

> Yet it grants reverence to the mind for which now no being is too low to be worthy of a loving curiosity. All knowledge becomes reverent and all being is open to inquiry.[23]

The viewpoint of the churchman, then, does not mediate super-knowledge. But it grants one a receptivity for ALL knowledge and a pattern for the interpretation of ANY knowledge.

Thus it is possible to see how the issue of context came into prominence for Niebuhr. Historical and religious relativism are not reducible to a simple determinism of an immanent reality; both one's historical and his religious community refer beyond themselves to a third term--a transcendent reality or cause with reference to which values are judged. THIS THIRD TERM IS THE CONTEXT IN WHICH THE OBJECT IS INTERPRETED, and reference to this context, which is a matter of faith, causes the viewer to order his behavior around certain values. It thus has social consequences, the shape of which we will now examine.

B. Faith's Influence on Culture

The relationship between faith and culture is one of mutual influence. While it is certainly faith that seeks embodiment in cultural forms (religious, political and economic societies), the

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[23] Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God," op. cit., p. 125.

particular social forms among which faiths seek expression influence the form which that faith finally assumes. These two emphases represent Niebuhr's concept of the relation between faith and culture during the closing years of his life. The former is illustrated in Radical Monotheism and Western Culture and the latter, in "The Protestant Movement and Democracy." We will examine each in turn, thereby rounding out our analysis of the contexts out of which Niebuhr wrote his studies of the church by noting the dynamic interrelationship between the contexts in which the church exists.

The topic of concern for Niebuhr in his 1957 Montgomery Lectureship at the University of Nebraska--published in 1960 as Radical Monotheism and Western Culture--was the role of faith in contemporary Western society.

> But when I reflect on the present human situation it is the problem of faith that presents itself to me as of the greatest importance . . . our whole culture is involved in a conflict of faiths that is distinctively different from the collision among religions or between religion and irreligion.[24]

The intent of the work was to analyze that conflict; it is thus a study of faith in its sociological manifestations and functions.

But faith, for Niebuhr, is not something to which one can be "external"; everyone participates in faith of one type or another; thus

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[24]Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, op. cit., p.11.

any study of faith must be done from the perspective of faith. The theologian, however, operates both critically and constructively within Christian faith or, better, faith in God. Thus RMWC is a theological work written from the perspective of Christian radical monotheism. Yet the perspective in this case serves primarily as norm by which one selects and judges the data he observes. The data would be available to any observer. But faith itself is identified in such a way that does not require extraordinary perception in order to observe; it is

> . . . the attitude and action of confidence in, and fidelity to, certain realities as the sources of value and the objects of loyalty.[25]

Faith, then, as confidence and fidelity is an ingredient dimension of all human behavior, not simply that which is termed "religious." Niebuhr's work analyzes faith in its relation to the religious, political and scientific aspects of culture. It may be classified into three types according to its objects: henotheism is confidence in and fidelity to a closed society that is understood as one among many;[26] polytheism often follows the dissolution of social faith and is a pluralism among objects of significance;[27] radical monotheism has for its

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[25] Ibid., p. 16.

[26] Ibid., pp. 25 ff.

[27] Ibid., pp. 26 ff.

value center and cause the principle of being and value itself.[28]

> Radical monotheism dethrones all absolutes short of the principle of being itself. At the same time it reverences every relative existent. Its two great mottoes are: "I am the Lord thy God; thou shalt have no other gods before me" and "Whatever is, is good."[29]

Niebuhr distinguishes sharply between these three forms of faith and "organized religions." The latter involve a restricted sphere of human existence (usually piety and a historic community), whereas the former pervades all spheres of activity.[30] As all-pervasive, however, faith is a dimension of organized religion, and analysis of its function in religious communities is neither more nor less appropriate than its analysis in relation to political and scientific communities.

Organized Christianity, like other religions, derives from a multitude of sources.

> If we look at these "organized religions" as they present themselves to us in their present-day social forms, practices and beliefs, as well as in their historical development, it is difficult to regard them as representative of one idea or attitude or as highly systematic in character or as derivative from one source.[31]

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[28] Ibid., pp. 31 ff.

[29] Ibid., p. 371.

[30] Ibid., p. 48.

[31] Ibid., p. 50.

Nevertheless these "movements in human history" have their various elements focused around certain basic convictions or "magnetic centers."[32] The church is thus a historic community, with multiple ancestry whose organizing principle and power is Jesus Christ. Yet in neither the church nor in other organized religions is the unity complete and radical monotheism purely achieved.

In fact the church very often practices "church-centered henotheism." In this faith

> . . . the community of those who hold common beliefs, practice common rites, and submit to a common rule becomes the immediate object of trust and the cause of loyalty. . . . To have faith in God and to believe the church becomes one and the same thing. . . .
>
> Rites, instead of being dramatic re-enactments of what God has done, is doing and will do to men, becomes divine enactments in a closed society; the deeds of the church or its priests tend to be identified with the deeds of God.[33]

Yet even in the midst of this ecclesiasticism "echoes of monotheism continue to be heard."[34] The church is thus continually in the tension created by the conflict of faith with faith, of social henotheism with radical monotheism. Its particular manifestation of this tension is its temptation always to sacrifice intensity for universality; thus one

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[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid., pp. 58f.

[34] Ibid., p. 59.

finds Christianity in the name and for the sake of universality and community, restricting its sphere of concern to that of religion.[35] Christianity is clearly concerned to be a "total ethos and not merely a piety,"[36] yet it

> . . . has tended, far more than Judaism, to define itself as a religion in which all religious practices, all piety, are to be reformed by confidence in God and loyalty to his cause.[37]

This tendency towards universality with its consequent loss of pervasiveness is expressed in ordinary use of the word "church": "The word 'church' means for us a place of worship more frequently than it means a people, a community."[38]

The church, then, is the organizational expression of the Christian community--an historical movement with diverse ancestry unified to some degree by focus on Jesus Christ, and concentrating on the religious dimension of life.[39] Its faith is in perpetual tension between the radical monotheism it professes and the social henotheism or polytheism which it often manifests. In its diversity or origin, it precisely parallels political and scientific organizations and thus is a

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[35] Ibid., pp. 62 f.

[36] Ibid., p. 62.

[37] Ibid., p. 63.

[38] Idem.

[39] Cf. Niebuhr, "The Norm of the Church," loc. cit.

part of human culture.

With this work a strand of Niebuhr's thought about the church is woven to completion, namely, its relativity. That which provides the church with its raison d'etre--the faith to which it bears witness--may be found equally active outside it. The church as visible religious organization is expression of the historic Christian community; but that community itself is neither the total manifestation nor the sole bearer of that radical monotheism which it professes. At best it is a witness to the possibility of that faith for all men. Or, as Niebuhr would prefer to say, it is witness to that One in whom radical monotheism trusts and to whom it is loyal. But it is that One alone who has the value of deity, and fidelity to that One is not restricted to any one historic community. The church is thus one human community like others; its purpose distinguishes it: the purpose of increasing the love of God and neighbor among men. But it never supposes that that love's increase is finally dependent upon its efforts.

Niebuhr then turns to the political dimension of culture and asks whether or not faith is an ingredient here too. He finds that it is. The same triadic structure of loyalty and confidence that was noted in religious communities is also present in political organizations. With respect to loyalty, three observations indicate the presence of faith:

> The first is that the nation-states base their existence on the loyalty of their citizens and not only on the latter's fears and desires for benefits; the second, that the nations as communities achieve their unity and justify their existence by pledging their loyalty to transcendent causes; and third, that the loyalty expected of citizens is the double loyalty extended to the nation's cause as well as to nation as cause.[40]

One also notes that the forms of that faith are similar to the forms which appear in organized religion: henotheism and monotheism (Niebuhr finds polytheism not a helpful category when analyzing the faiths of political groups; the existence of a political community presupposes more unity than polytheism could provide). As one might suspect, henotheism is a characteristic type of faith appearing in the political communities, a faith which regards the community itself to be the source and conserver of all value. But

> In the West . . . it is not to be taken for granted that henotheism in which the political society itself is the center of value and cause of loyalty, is the dominant faith. One thing that gives Western politics its character is the presence in it of a ferment of monotheist conviction and a constant struggle of universal with particularist faith. National faith is forever being qualified by monotheism.[41]

The presence of these two types of faith and the struggle between them can be seen in analyzing the bases of religious freedom, the

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[40] Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, op. cit., p. 67.

[41] Ibid., p. 69.

dogma of human equality and the basis of democratic process. In each case, not the form which the resolution of the issue takes, but the context in which the decision is made reflects the faith present in the system.

Religious freedom, for example, may be defended either on the grounds of the primacy of one's obligation to God over that to the state, or it may be defended on the grounds that one's religious loyalties are secondary to those of the state and are tolerated so long as the latter are not threatened.[42] Furthermore, both the supporters and the attackers of the notion of human equality are engaged in a battle of faiths; for the basis to which one appeals in his arguing is either the ultimate ground of all being or some finite reality as a center of value. Furthermore, the democratic process itself is an arena in which the two forms of faith strive. For democracy may be supported as if the voice of the people were itself supreme center of value.

> On the other hand, the democratic process may be carried on within the context of monotheistic faith. Then no relative power . . . can claim absolute sovereignty or total loyalty. . . . Relying on the ultimate source of being and the ultimate power that conserves beings, men will accept the relativity of all their

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[42] Ibid., p. 70.

> judgments and continue in their striving to make political decisions that express their universal faith.[43]

With respect to the scientific community, the issue of faith is two-fold. On the one hand is the question of our faith IN science, and on the other, the question of the faith(s) of the scientific community itself. Laymen, Niebuhr finds, tend to believe in science because of the "signs and wonders" wrought by that community, because of the predictions made that come true, and because they have been loyal to the human community at large.[44] Yet the theologian notes at least two arenas of faith-conflict in science. In one, the scientist works in secrecy to protect a national interest although his inclination is towards the universal sharing of wisdom. This is the issue of henotheism vs. monotheism. The same issue is raised when scientists use persons or things as means to further the cause of science itself rather than using science to further the cause of being.[45]

In the scientific community, the familiar battle between henotheism and monotheism rages on. The tendency to find the "scientific method" or "truth" as the ultimate center of value and determiner of the good and the beautiful reflects a closed-society type of faith. On the other hand,

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[43] Ibid., p. 77.

[44] Ibid., pp. 79f.

[45] Ibid., p. 83.

> . . . radical faith in that One seems present to the theological point of view in the confidence with which pure science seems to approach anything and everything in the world as potentially meaningful. It does not assert explicitly nor does it imply, as universal religion and ethics do, that whatever is, is good. But in its domain it appears to move with the confidence that whatever is, is worthy of attention.[46]

These two faiths continue to oppose each other within the scientific community, and to give form to the particular enterprises undertaken by that community.

Faith, according to Niebuhr, is thus not only a matter of religion. It is embodied in one's total life,[47] and shapes his response in every situation.

C. Culture's Influence on Faith

But not only does faith exert an influence on the total life of man and society. So also, for Niebuhr, does the cultural community influence the ways in which faith comes to expression. This is the topic explored by Niebuhr once more in his essay "The Protestant Movement and Democracy in the United States." Published in 1961 as part of an anthology called The Shaping of American Religion, this essay represents Niebuhr's mature attempt to offer a comprehensive

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[46] Ibid., p. 87.

[47] Cf. Hoedemaker, The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 46.

interpretation of Protestantism in the context of American democracy. Its method is first, to identify Protestantism and then to consider the manifestations of that reality under the influence of American Democracy. The essay is NOT a consideration of the social function of Protestantism nor does it describe the influence which Protestantism has exerted on Democracy. Niebuhr recognizes the reality of these influences--he knows the relationship to be one of mutual interaction--yet he insists that

> Theology must leave to the historians and critics of political institutions and democratic thought the task of assessing the influence of Protestantism on democracy.[48]

He is fearful that if Protestant theology undertakes this task, it

> . . . has already exchanged Protestant for democratic faith, has found the justification of religion in its promotion of a human and temporal cause, and has confused the power of religion with the power of God.[49]

Protestant theology does not deny the influence of Christian faith on culture; rather, it finds this influence to be of secondary importance when viewed from the point of view of the Protestant principle.

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[48] H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Protestant Movement and Democracy in the United States," Religion in American Life, Vol. I, The Shaping of American Religion, ed. James Ward Smith and A. Leland Jamison (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 48.

[49] Ibid., p. 49.

> So it seems that the only question a Protestant theological critic can properly undertake to answer is the one about the effect of democracy on that Protestantism whose nature he has tried to understand from within.[50]

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[50] Idem, italics mine. In fact, however, Niebuhr overstates his case in this 1961 essay. It is especially strange to come upon such a statement right on the heels of Radical Monotheism in which the impact of faith on culture was the topic of concern. Niebuhr gives two reasons for refusing such an analysis here: (1) the multiplicity of causative factors operative in history, and (2) the dangers of henotheism. Both are unconvincing. Henotheism, faith in a single object as source of value "which is, however, only one among many" (Radical Monotheism, op. cit., p. 24), is a constant temptation, not only for secular society but also for the church. In ecclesiasticism,

> History is interpreted so that the story of the mighty deeds of God in creation, judgment and redemption is replaced by church history or 'holy history," an account of special deeds whereby the special community was formed and saved (ibid., pp. 58f.).

An analysis of Protestantism in America which acknowledged a mutual influence between Protestantism and Democracy, yet refuses on the grounds of faith--rather than those of professional interest--to analyze more than one side of this influence smacks strongly of precisely the henotheism Niebuhr wished to avoid. It suggests that certain facts are incompatible with one's perspective and must therefore be ignored. And this is precisely the position of henotheism. Monotheism, on the other hand, is characteristically open to wisdom from whatever source, for its object is not one among the many but the One beyond the many (cf. "Faith in Gods and in God," op. cit., p. 125). Furthermore, the investigation of Protestantism's influence on culture need not imply an idolatry of culture. Such investigations may reveal the dynamic and culturally independent nature of Protestantism, just as consideration of the influence of culture on Protestantism may obscure that dimension and elevate, e.g., economic factors as prime movers in history. Thus it is not the object examined that determines the faith of the investigator but the significance he attributes to that object.

Concerning the first objection, Niebuhr is certainly right in rejecting any reductionistic approach to historical causality. Again

Niebuhr first sets out the characteristics of Protestantism considered in itself. The initial feature of Protestantism noted is its dynamic character:

> Between the polarities of order and movement, of structure and process, the Protestant finds himself and his communities always drawn toward this dynamic side.[51]

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it is radical monotheism which undergirds such a rejection: that faith serves to relativize every finite reality or power and to prevent it from usurping the divine prerogative of sovereignty. Thus neither religion nor democracy nor economics can be regarded as sole sufficient causes of historical events. Yet the other movement of radical monotheism is equally significant: "All that is, is good" (Radical Monotheism, op. cit., p. 37). No object or event is without its significance for the movement of history and without its impact on that movement. For the final ultimate power in history both negates and gives value to ALL events, not just to some. Thus historical causality is indeed complex, and Niebuhr is correct to avoid the simplistic notion that Christianity "caused" democracy to develop as it did. Nevertheless it is equally one-sided to negate its causative influence completely and to be content with a mere listing of similarities (cf. p. 49). One might indicate a dimension of impact--as Niebuhr himself did in Kingdom of God in America, "The Idea of Covenant in American Democracy," and Radical Monotheism and Western Culture--without suggesting that these were the only factors involved or without having to discard his perspective within the Christian faith in order to identify its influence.

In terms of this essay, these phrases of Niebuhr serve mainly to limit his topic of consideration and to announce that topic clearly. As such they must be affirmed. But they also indicate a certain inconsistency which runs through Niebuhr's works: a kind of unresolved suspicion of external views of the church which is out of line with the main current of his thought crops up periodically. We will have occasion to return to this matter in the concluding chapter.

[51] Ibid., p. 22.

That dynamic is partially identified as a principled objection to established stable orders of Christian faith.[52] And, unlike many movements of protest, Protestantism does not exhibit a cyclical return to older positions but rather launches out into an unknown future without reliance on ancient vessels.

Persons who attempt to account for Protestantism's perennial rejection of established forms often attribute it to the refusal of individuals or groups to be subject to the higher powers.[53] Niebuhr acknowledges the presence of mixed motives within various Protestant movements, but finds all such explanations to be inconclusive: "it does not follow that these (motives) are the source rather than the concomitants of protest, or that they are the sources of all protest."[54] Protestants themselves regard their movements of protest to derive from and to be secondary to primary positive renewal of freedom, hope, confidence and moral seriousness all viewed in the light of the immediacy of the divine sovereignty.

> Revolt against authority is only incidental in a movement for which freedom is a positive thing--freedom

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[52] Ibid., p. 27.

[53] Ibid., pp. 28f.

[54] Ibid., p. 30.

> for faith and hope and goodness rather than a negative liberty from external control.[55]

The second characteristic of Protestantism is its organization, or, to use Niebuhr's term, its ORDER.

> Though Protestantism seems intelligible only if it is regarded primarily as a movement in Western Christendom, it also presents itself as an order or as congeries of orders. It is our name for a collection of Christian organizations with habitual modes of government and obedience, with doctrinal statements about what is or ought to be believed, with methods of economic support, with recognized officials and offices with stated forms of prayer and ritual, with established ways of education in Sunday Schools, colleges, and seminaries.[56]

Order both follows and resides within movements.[57] It is thus not a separate or opposite tendency within dynamic Protestantism; rather, it is that dynamic seeking concrete manifestation in the world.

Here Niebuhr exhibits the genuine positive appreciation for the structures of Protestantism that distinguishes him from some of his Neo-orthodox contemporaries. For Niebuhr the orders of Protestantism manifest the influence of Scripture, of tradition, of the confrontation between movement and establishment, and most of all,

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[55] Ibid., p. 36.

[56] Ibid., pp. 36 f.

[57] Ibid., p. 36.

divine sovereignty.[58] The orders of Protestantism are tentative yet serious expressions of "orientation in a dynamic, divinely governed world."[59]

How, then, has this moving order or ordered movement fared in its relationship with American Democracy? Niebuhr answers first by indicating what he means by democracy and then by citing two directions Protestantism has taken within its democratic environment.

By "democracy" Niebuhr means

> . . . those institutions of government, those settled social habits and modes of thought that tend to prevent the absolute control of individual citizens or of groups in the American nation by any individual or communal power. . . . By democracy, we mean, therefore, the ordered practice of protecting the people's liberties, the people being considered not as a unanimous whole exercising a general will, but as a community of individual selves and a community of communities.[60]

Democracy in America has granted Protestantism--along with all other religious groups--freedom, or, to put it negatively, has deprived it of political support. This setting of freedom has fostered the development of Protestantism's tendencies towards factionalism and cultural dependence as well as its drives towards unity and

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[58] Ibid., pp. 39-47.

[59] Ibid., p. 47.

[60] Ibid., pp. 49f.

dynamism. One cannot properly regard democracy as the cause of these expressions of Protestantism but one may certainly regard it as providing the context in which they can flourish.

Under the aegis of democracy, disunity and dependence have run rampant. Without governmental support, limitation or intervention, every European national form of Protestantism could maintain itself in America.[61] Likewise indigenous religious organizations have been allowed "if not encouraged."[62] Furthermore, "free initiative in religious and moral enterprise" has led to the establishment of groups which function as independent churches.[63] The result is the existence of over two hundred Protestant denominations in the United States--a powerful monument to disunity! Equally as divided and divisive is the proliferation of beliefs, emphases, interpretations and rites which exists within and among the denominations.

But democracy not only allows Protestantism's variety to run rampant; it also relegates all Protestant groups to the status of voluntary associations.

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[61] Ibid., p. 52.

[62] Ibid., p. 53.

[63] Ibid., p. 55.

> Seeking to survive, thrown into competition for attention, membership, and economic support, not only with each other but with secular enterprises claiming the same resources, they appear to have adjusted themselves all too well to the wishes of the people.[64]

Protestant groups have often fitted their emphases to the desires of their constituency rather than to their immediate needs and possibilities. But even more basically, Protestantism has often represented an adjustment to "American social religion," the conviction that society itself is the ultimate cause to be served and the source of significance. In competition for its survival, Protestantism has often presented itself as an incarnation of the religious spirit which animates American democracy.

> Not infrequently Protestants have defined Christian freedom in democratic terms, not as freedom from sin and death and as that bondage to God which is perfect freedom, but as liberty to worship as one pleases or, better, as deliverance from political tyranny, from want and from fear. . . . The Word of God and the voice of the people; the hope of the kingdom of heaven and the American dream; the forgiveness of sins and toleration; the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and affable manners are confused and confounded.[65]

Denominationalism and culture religion have both issued from the freeing of Protestantism from governmental regulation.

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[64] Ibid., p. 57.

[65] Ibid., pp. 58f.

Yet Niebuhr observes that these tendencies do not exhaust the shape of Protestantism in America.

> For, alongside the trend toward fractionalization, there has been in this Protestantism a countervailing movement toward unity; and alongside the tendency toward dependency on the people, there has been the constant effort to make the people fully aware of their dependence, not, indeed, on the church, but on God.[66]

The drive towards unity has been both organizational and mental; it has occasioned the unions and reunions and mergers of numerous denominational structures. Unfettered by political intervention, perhaps fostered by national unification and certainly motivated by religious revivals, ecumenical movements toward union, cooperation and federation have flourished. But the drive is more than simply organizational; it also includes the creation of a "common temper, outlook, and purpose that do not need to be precisely formulated."[67] This mental kinship is perhaps most evident in the "growing similarity of the various groups in internal organization, religious attitudes and action," and all of these are in some degree attributable to the "American political and social organization."[68]

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[66] Ibid., p. 59.

[67] Idem.

[68] Ibid., p. 63.

The question is, to WHAT degree? Is the emergence of a "core Protestantism" in this country the result of "the Americanization of Protestantism"?[69] Or is there a tendency in Protestantism towards independence from acculturation? Niebuhr believes that there is and that it has flourished within American Democracy.

Protestantism has as a cardinal tenet the utter and absolute dependence of man on God alone. From this perspective, it criticizes all claims of divine rights on the part of governments, including democracies.[70] Protestantism in America has shown a continual and vigorous

> . . . witness to the overruling sovereignty of God, by exposition of the divine demands and actions, by calls upon individuals and groups for obedience and repentance before the ultimate holy and gracious power.[71]

This drive towards independence is visible also in the conflict "about the context in which democratic institutions are to be used and understood."[72] Niebuhr observes that these institutions may be interpreted in either Christian or nationalistic contexts; they may be understood and used as vessels of either radical monotheism or social henotheism. And American Protestantism has been on the side of

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[69] Ibid., p. 65.

[70] Ibid., pp. 66 f.

[71] Ibid., p. 67.

[72] Ibid., p. 68.

"universalism rather than of individualism, of moral obligation as prior to freedom, of representative rather than delegated government."[73]

Finally, Protestantism has exercised its independence by functioning as a critic of culture and as an advocate of social reforms.[74]

In conclusion, Niebuhr observes that, vis á vis American Democracy, Protestantism has concentrated upon the individual in his solitariness and has exhibited less interest "in changing the fundamental assumptions of the common mind, the habitual actions of the whole society."[75] This is to say that Protestantism is a limited expression of the whole people of God. The rest of the essay has said that it is a real one.

To summarize briefly, Niebuhr regards Protestantism to be primarily and inclusively a renewal movement originating in a revived perception of the realities of the Christian faith and including organization within itself as its vehicle for advance, its expression and its means of preservation. There is no movement without order,

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[73] Ibid., p. 69.

[74] Ibid., pp. 69f.

[75] Ibid., p. 70.

yet the presence of order does not insure movement. Thus the latter precedes the former in significance as constituitive of Protestantism.

In the context of Democracy--characterized chiefly here as the provision of religious liberty--Protestantism has shown itself as ordered movement in two directions. On the one hand, it moves towards disunity and cultural dependence, and on the other it moves towards unity and cultural discontinuity. What is it that unifies these two movements, so that "Protestantism" refers to a single complex reality rather than to two different realities? Insofar as Niebuhr answers this question here, he refers to three elements. First, Protestantism in both its movements is oriented towards a dynamic concept of history and faith; secondly, it involves a renewed perception of the immediacy of the divine context of existence; and finally, it focuses its efforts on the individual and his personal and solitary appropriation of the Christian faith. Unlike many writers, Niebuhr gives both directions of that movement a positive significance in witnessing to the sovereignty of God, all the while resolutely refusing to derive that significance from the cultural effectiveness of Protestantism in making that witness.

Thus, for Niebuhr, faith and culture interpenetrate each other: faith is inescapably social and society is inescapably faithful. Every man is caught in the tensions and movements that arise from

this relationship. The church, as representative of the human community shares in this condition and is therefore in continual process which is finally completed only in God. Thus the dual approach to the study of the church is necessitated by its relations to two different contexts, but the constant interpenetration of these contexts means that finally no rigid lines can be drawn between that which belongs to the external view of the church, and that which is internal.

CONCLUSION

We have now concluded our exposition of Niebuhr's concept of the church as it developed during his lifetime. We have witnessed both the shifts of emphasis and the underlying continuities as well as the contemporary concerns and persisting perplexities in his thought as we examined a number of his representative works.

Our attitude towards Niebuhr's concept of the church has been and remains one of enthusiasm. Our task in this final chapter is to justify--or at least to offer an explanation of--this enthusiasm.

Our conclusion, summarily stated, is this: H. Richard Niebuhr's concept of the church raises and deals significantly with the major issues which have surfaced in contemporary concern with church renewal. His work speaks to these times; perhaps no more can or need be said of one so contemporary as he.

One thing to be learned from Niebuhr is that value, while it resides "objectively" in the "other," is nevertheless relative to the context in which it is determined. In assessing the significance of Niebuhr's concept of the church, then, our first task is to indicate the context in relation to which that value will be determined. Then it will be possible to show how Niebuhr's work relates to that context

in a way that warrants enthusiasm. This method of analysis is thoroughly Niebuhrian; it is concerned with context and value and historical relativism and has something of a confessional character in that we acknowledge that this is not the ONLY context in which his work can be assessed.

A. Historical Context

The concern which has motivated this study is the concern for the contemporary renewing of the church. The arena in which that concern is pursued is the academy, but the issues are focused existentially in the ongoing life of the church. The preceding chapters have demonstrated that Niebuhr shared this concern, but the decade since his death has seen a new situation emerge in the relations of the church with the world. We will attempt to point to that new situation by presenting a brief sketch of "lived" history of the sixties. We make no pretense at providing an adequate historical representation of the course of church history during a decade; our attempt is rather to set a context against which to assess Niebuhr's work, a context which includes meanings and crises of meanings as well as "facts."

When H. Richard Niebuhr died in 1962, the church in the United States was on the verge of an optimistic re-entry into the "secular" realm bringing its moral powers to bear on the social ills

of the time--especially those of racism, war, and poverty. Pictures of clergymen, seminarians, nuns and laymen in the front ranks of civil rights marches, anti-war protests, and local anti-poverty programs were commonplace. Courageous pronouncements on social issues emanated regularly from denominational officials, and it seemed to the local parish minister that he could lead and represent his congregation in ongoing movements of social change. If he sometimes neglected--or browbeat--his congregation, it was in the name and for the sake of the CAUSE which he--and presumably they--served, and he could be excused (if not justified) as being merely over-enthusiastic. For those clergy impatient with the bureaucratic inertia of the institutional church and eager to be on the front lines of God's redemptive work in the world, there was the Peace Corps promising opportunity for sacrifice and visible tangible service, and the Office of Economic Opportunity.[1] We were "honest to God" and found grounds for celebration and hope in the "secular city," having discarded the last vestiges of supranaturalism for a "religionless Christianity." And then Vatican II demonstrated the flexibility of what we had thought of as the most rigid of hierarchical structures.

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[1] Some wags have noticed the number of former clergymen in the ranks of the O.E.O. and have named it the Office of Ecclesiastical Outcasts.

Persons were up against social change in the sixties, and with Kennedy's vision and Johnson's acumen in domestic politics, it looked for a while as if utopia or something approaching it were within reach.

In the midst of this optimism over the re-discovery of the world, the ecclesiastical structures themselves came in for a devastating round of criticism from zealous members, irate critics, wearied administrators and outside observers alike. A flood of ecclesiastical exposés[2] washed over the shelves in the popular religious

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[2] A partial but suggestive list of titles might include the following: David Poling, The Last Years of the Church (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1969); Peter Berger, The Noise of Solemn Assemblies (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1961); Peter Berger, The Precarious Vision (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1961); James A. Pike, A Time for Christian Candor (New York: Harper & Row, 1964); Gibson Winter, The Suburban Captivity of the Churches (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1962); Robert Adolfs, The Grave of God: Has the Church a Future? (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); R.B. Garrison, A Portrait of the Church--Warts and All (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964); A. Roy Eckardt, The Surge of Piety in America (New York: Association Press, 1958); Albert H. van den Heuvel, The Humiliation of the Church (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966); Jeffrey K. Hadden, The Gathering Storm in the Churches (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1969); Gregory Wilson, The Stained Glass Jungle (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1962); Pierre Berton, The Comfortable Pew (New York and Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1965); Judi Culbertson and P. Bard, Games Christians Play (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); and James J. Kavanaugh, A Modern Priest Looks at His Outdated Church (New York: Trident Press, 1967).

departments and were read and believed by leading churchmen across the nation. Iconoclasm seemed the order of the day, and, to paraphrase Dr. Outler, the iconoclasts seemed to assume an endless supply of images to be smashed. They were wrong, but it took time for that to become apparent.

The prospects of effective and representative participation in significant social reform--NOT a new vision of the role of the church in the world--sustained the enthusiasm of the religious in the sixties. The enemy was superstition and recalcitrance, and while the local congregations seemed well supplied with both, they also afforded the clergyman time and freedom to exercise his reforming and prophetic zeal. Reprisals were few and accountability rarely called for; when they appeared, they were received with considerable righteous indignation.

During such an era, Niebuhr's analysis of the role of faith in social reform and his presentation of the church as concerned with matters of faith and ethics seemed curiously out of place. He was heard and heeded in his call for churchly re-entry into the marketplace, but the wisdom of his warnings against entangling alliances and of his insights into the precedence of faith over institutional gerrymandering went largely ignored. THAT line was usurped by the

die-hard defenders of the status-quo whose announced intent was the hindrance rather than the enhancement of social change.

That was too bad, for serious grappling with those insights might have prepared us for what was to come. The Neo-liberal decade of the sixties appears now to have been an interlude between the spiritual wars of the 50's and the present.

Sometime in the 60's a transition occurred that effectively wiped out our optimism and turned our reforming zeal in another direction. Oswald and Sirhan killed the Kennedy's; Ray killed King; Viet Nam killed Johnson as well as our national self-respect; Chicago police killed McCarthy and Humphrey; and Kent State killed the youth movement. The draft killed Mohammed Ali and the Black Muslim's, Malcolm X. Meanwhile the local church killed the clergy who reciprocated in kind, and theology, cut loose from the life of the church, went into a coma.[3]

The generation of giants in theology came to an end in the 60's and no immediate successors appeared in view. This resulted in a kind of dryness in technical works and fadishness in the more popular ones. The serious work of hammering out the implications of

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[3]Some of these statements are evident hyporbole, but are intended to point to significant events in the 60's that cumulatively occasioned a shift in the ecclesiastical situation.

the seminal works of the giants seemed less "relevant" than trying either to BE a giant or at least to engineer a fad. One astute observer labeled his view of the theological scene of the late 60's "A View from the Beach at Ebb Tide."[4]

Meanwhile with the death of the "causes" that had held together concerned clergy and slow-moving churches, ministers had to look again at the local congregations. We were appalled at what we saw. For there were the same recalcitrance, illusions, prejudices and fears that now we knew, thanks to the Kerner Report, were at the root of the injustices we had sought to alleviate. We knew how to organize protests and to write declarations and to exert pressures, but how to change people in their interior loyalties and trusts and hopes on a massive scale remained beyond our ken. We looked again to psychology for aid, and for a while we found sensitivity training promising. But its concern for "joy" and graceful accommodation to given circumstances seemed to smack of "cheap grace" and was incredibly shallow to those seared by visions of starving peasants, napalmed villages and rat-infested ghettoes alongside the visions of satiated affluence held up in advertising. Our concern was not how to extricate ourselves gracefully from the situation but how the future

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[4]Albert C. Outler, unpublished paper.

generations were to live (to adopt a phrase attributed to Bonhoeffer). The local congregations seemed to be the last place where that concern might be implemented, and so the exodus began. The clergy began to "drop out," some with bitterness, some with defiance, some with quiet resignation, and some with resolve to serve the church in other areas of her life; but most left the parish with a nagging sense of guilt that something SHOULD have been possible, that the Christian faith's language about transformed values resulting in transformed lives SHOULD have been applicable to work in the local church. But we did not know how. Our training had given us intellectual acumen and methods of social action. But in religious or spiritual insight we were bankrupt, and this seemed to be the level where change was required. We left in despair over the prospects of the local church, for we lacked a vision of its nature and task. We forgot why it was important and had never known how to work at that importance which we suspected must have been there. But with the exposés to back us up, we decided that THAT ship was sinking into a mire of materialism, defensiveness and trivia, and we did not deem it worthwhile to go down with her.

Meanwhile the world had come into a time in which virtually <u>all</u> values, certainties and presuppositions were called into question. We suffered from "future shock" brought on not simply by the deaths mentioned earlier, but by that plus the awarenss of a

virtually limitless technical capacity and virtually endless human need. The existing social order had been a good one, but its days were clearly numbered. The story of God's call to Abram to go out into a new land which was not yet made known (Genesis 12:1) was a paradigm of the times, and the crisis it precipitated was genuinely SPIRITUAL.

Up against a radical deterioration of established patterns of life, persons quested for symbols and images that would make sense of current events and permit the facing of the future with some equanimity. And since those of the church had been declared null and void by her best-trained spokesmen (as misunderstood popularly), they turned elsewhere--to fundamentalism or to Eastern religions or, more commonly, to increasingly ingenious and elaborate attempts to escape from the consciousness that bombarded us. Something like the above represents the situation of the church in the 70's, and it is in relation to that context that we propose to evaluate Niebuhr's work. His work might be examined in relation to other contexts--academia, for example, or contemporary Christian thought. It exists in many contexts and its relation to them all is worthy of note. Our claim is not for exclusiveness. But it IS a claim to consider Niebuhr's work in relation to a context which was of major concern to him, as it is to us.

The question which we must ask, then, is this: to what extent does Niebuhr's concept of the church and of the relation between two views of the church deal significantly with the present ecclesiastical situation?

B. The Church

How does Niebuhr speak to these times when the church's prestige is so low and her prospects so dim?

He begins by being thoroughly sympathetic to the harshest critiques of institutional Christianity, but he goes far beyond the defeatism inherent in many of them. He provides an image within which the institution may be appreciated.

Throughout his work, Niebuhr maintains vigorously that the denominational organizations of the Christian religion are painfully contradictory of the church as it is spoken of in their professions.[5] Niebuhr would be inclined to agree with contemporary ecclesiastical fault-finders and perhaps even to expose dimensions they had overlooked. His belief in human intransigence and sinfulness was quite complete.[6]

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[5] Cf. Niebuhr, "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," loc. cit., pp. 106 f.

[6] Cf. H. Richard Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner," Journal of Religion, XV (1935), pp. 272-280.

But so was his belief in the created goodness of all that is. Niebuhr thus addresses the contemporary disparagers of organized Christianity by maintaining not only that the institutions in themselves are not the church (with which most of them would agree) but also that they are not meant to be.

Once one ceases to measure and evaluate religious institutions by criteria inappropriate to them, then one is free to observe the positive value of these institutions. They are NOT the church but "agencies or orders of the church."[7] Their business is the service of the church, and for this business they are quite well-equipped in spite of their evident shortcomings.

Religious institutions conserve the gains of revolutionary movements and, by fixing them, provide for their transmission to subsequent generations. And even in their perversions, they provide the occasion for new movements to emerge.[8] Moreover these institutions continually point to "the unity of the human race in Christ, to the reality of reconciliation and forgiveness in the world, to the glory

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[7] Niebuhr, "The Churches and the Body of Christ," loc. cit., p. 622.

[8] Cf. Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America, op. cit., pp. 167f., 198.

of our destiny in God."[9] Even their conservatism signifies the redemptive designs of God on all reality. Furthermore, the worship, preaching, symbols and benevolences of the institutions, though fraught with ambiguity, nevertheless function as pointers to a dimension of reality otherwise ignored.[10] In addition, these societies have a function

> . . . in rescuing us from our individual isolation, in checking our efforts to make ourselves or our parties the centers of community, in mediating the great tradition of the community of men in Christ with God.[11]

The churches in themselves are NOT the church, nor are they likely to become the church--thus far the critics are right. But they DO serve the church and in them the church is genuinely expressed.

Renewal of the churches, therefore, does NOT have to do with deinstitutionalizing them. Hoedemaker is correct in observing that Niebuhr does not regard ecclesiastical institutions as limitations of the church's true being and mission.[12] Renewal of the churches has

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[9]Niebuhr, "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," loc. cit., pp. 108f.

[10]Ibid., p. 109.

[11]Niebuhr, "The Churches and the Body of Christ," loc. cit., p. 621.

[12]Hoedemaker, op. cit., p. 142.

rather to do with recovery of the TRANSPARENCY of institutions--directing them away from self-righteousness or self-defensiveness towards their rightful aim--service to the church and signaling the presence of the church.

What, then, IS "the church" if it be so distinguishable from--though bound to--the religious institutions of Christianity? For as Hoedemaker rightly observes, Niebuhr begins his discussion of the church, not with abstract theological definition, but with

> . . . the fact that the church is there, both in given structures and in given patterns of relation to the social and cultural environment in which it lives; in other words, Niebuhr's reflection on the church begins with its tangible thereness. . . .[13]

The church, for Niebuhr, is primarily an ACTIVITY, the activity of moving towards God and then from God redemptively towards the world. The church is the responding to God-in-Christ and Christ-in-God;[14] wherever that process occurs, THERE is the church, regardless of the organization or the tradition or the liturgy involved. The church, for Niebuhr, is NOT bound by religious practices and communities but rather occurs WHEREVER Jesus Christ is

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[13] Ibid., p. 138.

[14] Niebuhr, "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," op. cit.

the center of human community.[15] This "organic movement of the People of God"[16] comes to expression in religious institutions and indeed includes institutionalization as a direction of its dialectical movement, but is not limited to the organizations of Christianity. "The church is where love of God and neighbor is increased, where God and neighbor are served."[17]

The temptation, upon noting Niebuhr's stress on activity as definitive of the church, is to ignore religious institutions altogether and to attempt to take up the task outside them. But this is to misunderstand the nature of a movement. A movement does not exist without structures any more than does a community[18] or any more than does an internal life exist without external embodiment.[19] This inseparability of movement and institution is the reason for

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[15]Niebuhr, "The Norm of the Church," loc. cit.; cf. also "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," loc. cit., p. 108.

[16]Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America, op. cit.

[17]Hoedemaker, op. cit., p. 145.

[18]Cf. Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, op. cit.

[19]Cf. Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, op. cit., p. 89.

Niebuhr's concern for religious institutions, although he knows that the movement has priority.

But involvement in the movement that is church has another dimension as well. Participation in the purpose of the church brings with it participation in the eschatological society, the trans-temporal community of all Christ's contemporaries, "the society of that new order of creation in which all things shall become and are new."[20] This society is no ideal but a reality and as such, a fit object of hope and confidence; its existence resides in the minds of men and forms a spiritual community united by a common spiritual life:

> We can only point to the reality of that community by referring to the common picture of the world and of history, of the common reliance on the government of God, of the common memory of Christ and the common hope of salvation.[21]

This eschatological society is not the totality of Christians, but is rather of a different order of reality--the order that is continually intruding into history, emerging as part of the transformed world of God.[22]

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[20] Niebuhr, "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," loc. cit., p. 114; cf. pp. 112 f.

[21] Niebuhr, "The Churches and the Body of Christ," loc. cit., p. 622.

[22] Niebuhr, "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," loc. cit., pp. 114 f.

Although Niebuhr speaks of the church directly as a POLAR reality having TWO dimensions, in practice his works include reference to a THIRD. The church includes institution, movement and community--or, to use more formal categories, form, dynamic and content. While these dimensions may and must be distinguished in analysis of the church, in reality they are never separable. Whenever any one of them is deficient, then the church is in need of a new reformation, and reference to the triadic description of the church indicates the direction in which that reformation is needed. Times of institutional weakness are times for intensification of the renewal movement and the eschatological consciousness that breathe new life into dead forms or that demand the creation of new forms to hold the life that is present. A time of movemental stultification is a time for intensification of institutional life and eschatological attention that will become a "pregnant source of a new movement."[23] And a time of shallow contemporaneity with a loss of eschatological consciousness is a time for intensification of movemental and institutional life which will demonstrate once more the kinship among the faithful of all times.

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[23]Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America, op. cit.

In all these dimensions, however, the church is not an ultimate reality. The church is NOT-GOD,[24] but a human reality constantly receiving conversion and intended to bear witness to the graciousness of the Divine rule. The church in all three aspects is STILL the SUBJECTIVE POLE of the objective rule of God. As such she can and must continue to be self-critical lest her transparency be lost and she fall off into one of her many possible perversions.

But why, ask the church's detractors, need one bother with church renewal? Why not work directly on the reform of society?

Niebuhr was careful not to negate this alternative--in fact, he considered it one dimension of the church's calling, and one which his brother had undertaken.[25] It would be contradictory of monotheistic faith to work for the increase of that faith in order that other ends (e.g., social reform) might be achieved.[26] The only reason for working to increase among men the love of God and neighbor is that God is sovereign and gracious and the neighbor is my brother.

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[24]Niebuhr, "The Church Defines Itself in the World," loc. cit.

[25]Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," loc. cit., p. 249.

[26]Cf. Niebuhr, "Utilitarian Christianity," loc. cit.

Nevertheless the promotion of reconciliation with the way life is has social consequences, and Niebuhr does not hesitate to indicate them. His tone in so doing, however, is rather confessional than polemic:

> I also believe, with both the prophets and, of all men, Karl Marx, that the reformation of religion is the fundamental reformation of society. And I believe that nothing very important for mankind will happen as a result of our "conquest" of space or as a result of the cessation of the cold war unless the human spirit is revived within itself.[27]

Anyone seriously concerned with social justice who moves beyond naive utopianism finds himself dealing, both in himself and in others, with issues of fundamental loyalty and confidence, guilt and discouragement, pride and despair, in short, with issues of FAITH. And the church with its heritage of wisdom that relates directly to these issues, will have to be dealt with: it will be either a potent ally or a nearly insuperable obstacle.

Perhaps today, however, the reason for concern with church renewal is that persons are dealing with profoundly spiritual issues about which the church has a relevant word to offer.

Niebuhr noted in 1960 the religious void of the time when for many persons, "their half-gods have gone and the gods have not

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[27]Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," loc. cit., p. 251.

arrived."[28] According to our brief sketch of the sixties, the gods arrived but they turned out to be half-gods. Now, however, it's almost as if we are up against GOD--the mysterious void encompassing all that is has become visible--and we are terrified. The word that THIS one is gracious and utterly trustworthy--the Word in Jesus Christ--is extremely pertinent, and Niebuhr's way of framing the issue is extremely accessible to "secular" men for whom obscurity is anathema. Finding ways to embody witness to this Word is service to human need.

In evaluating Niebuhr's concept of the church relative to the task of church renewal, then, we conclude that he provided a concept of the church that is intelligible and that provides a clue to the direction renewal must take; furthermore, Niebuhr indicated as purpose of the church a task directly relevant to our times.

In candor, we acknowledge that he provided little in the way of a comprehensive, systematic doctrine of the church and less in the way of strategies for renewal. He stands somewhere between the dogmatician and the practitioneras a sort of ecclesiological provocateur offering images and directions and insights for those who

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[28] Ibid., p. 250.

are to follow.[29] But his offering holds considerable promise for both dogmatician and practical churchmen.

C. The Two Views of the Church

Relative to the problem of relating the two views of the church, our investigation has shown that Niebuhr consistently called for a uniting of the two and provided at least four ways of conceiving such a union. At this point we intend to assess briefly his contribution to a resolution of the problem in light of the present ecclesiastical situation.

Two criteria are relevant for judging the adequacy of a resolution to the problem of relating two views of the church. First, THE AREAS OF COMPETENCE OF THE TWO DISCIPLINES ARE DEFINED AND RESPECTED. Each discipline must retain its integrity while nevertheless allowing for the integrity of the other.[30] Sociology must recognize that its account of the origin and dynamics of a

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[29]Cf. James E. Dittes, The Church in the Way, and Gustafson, Treasure in Earthen Vessels, as examples of those who have built on the foundation laid by Niebuhr and applied his insights in the area of institutional Christianity.

[30]Niebuhr recognizes this principle when, in The Meaning of Revelation, he states that the "external" historian most genuinely concerned with the ways of God in the world is the one who makes no references to that concern but is most faithful in portraying the actual course of events (op. cit., p. 88).

phenomenon says nothing concerning its validity. Furthermore, theology must recognize that its account of the church's ultimate relationship is still not practical wisdom in terms of the actual functioning of the church in its penultimate context. Theology may declare the necessity for faith to achieve SOME social expression, but by itself it cannot declare that the present form of that expression is necessary.

This criterion has to do with preventing confusion between realms of discourse. That confusion lies behind many of the "exposés" of the church referred to earlier: a theological "imperialism" inputing sanctity to particular existing forms of the church is countered by a sociological "imperialism" evaluating the forms entirely by reference to their social function.

Secondly, THE VIEW OF THE CHURCH RESULTING FROM A JUNCTION OF THE TWO VIEWS WOULD NEED TO ACCOUNT AT LEAST IN PRINCIPLE FOR ALL THE DATA. The qualifier is appended for reasons well known to Niebuhr: finite man is limited in the amount of data he can encompass, and complete knowledge is the province of God alone. But this criterion demands the recognition of this finitude and the consequent refusal to absolutize any particular view by excluding relevant data. More particularly, this means that both traditional theological categories as well as contemporary sociological findings would be included in an understanding of

the church which emerged from a junction of the two views. This criterion also counters some errors in current pictures of the church wherein partial accounts are presented as though they were complete.

Any view of the relationship between internal and external views of the church which claims adequacy will have to meet these two criteria as well as the more common ones applicable to all reasonable thought (logical consistency and intelligibility). How then does Niebuhr fare in relationship to these criteria?

As we observed in the investigation, Niebuhr offers not one but four ways of conceiving the relationship between the two views of the church. Nevertheless, they are not discontinuous but cumulative. His conversionism of the 50's represents a culmination of, rather than a departure from, his previous insights. In that view he acknowledged both the reality of a complex object in view and a complex viewer capable of several standpoints, and he offered a schema positing a dynamic interrelation between them.

It will prove helpful to rehearse that schema briefly. Both internal and external views of the church have as their object the three-dimensional reality indicated in the preceding section; although each view may emphasize a different dimension, they nevertheless refer to the same complex reality. They are distinguished by the context in relation to which they analyze and interpret that reality:

the external view analyzes the church with reference to its penultimate (socio-cultural) context and the internal, with reference to its ultimate one. The church HAS both penultimate and ultimate relations; thus both analyses are appropriate.

But their interaction is not simply static. For the ultimate relationship of the church is not simply prior in being and value. It is also EXPRESSED IN the penultimate. That is to say, the penultimate relations of the church are transformed into transparent vehicles for the ultimate. Perception of the church's relation to God comes when her relation to society becomes transparent; this transformation occurs when particular events function as vehicles for exposing the ultimate context of the church.

This means that theology, as reflection on the church's ultimate relations is always forced back into a consideration of the penultimate ones through which the ultimate is expressed. Further, sociology, as reflection on the church's penultimate relations, is never simply that but also refers beyond itself, at least by implication. But BOTH theology and sociology--both external and internal views of the church--are FINITE.[31] Conversion does not consist of sociology becoming more theological (or theology, more sociological). The

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[31]Cf. Niebuhr, "Theology in the University," op. cit.

converting agent is not theology but CHRIST through the Gospel. Both theology and sociology are finite realities in need of conversion; both are capable of becoming transparent to that ultimate context in which the church exists, the divine sovereignty.

Our conclusion is that Niebuhr's schema of conversion meets the above criteria for adequacy as a resolution to the problem of the relationship of the two views. It is coherent and consistent; it specifies the respective fields of the two views and shows how they are related; and it is in principle open to all relevant data--anything that can be said about the church refers to either its ultimate or its penultimate relations. We will explore its significance presently. But one further question remains: to what extent was Niebuhr a consistent conversionist in practice? Did he, in actually writing about the church, make use of his own best insight into how that writing might bring together two apparently divergent views of the church? Or does he retain a residue of the very anti-institutional bias in his thought which makes him suspicious of the findings of external views of the church as not only incomplete but somehow misleading?

Niebuhr clearly intended to say that observation of the church in its penultimate relations functioned positively as indicator of the

transcendent context within which all exists.[32] Yet when one reflects on the CONTENT of the church's relation to its penultimate context as presented by Niebuhr, one is struck by three things. First, one perceives a tendency in Niebuhr's work to emphasize the corrupting influence of society on the church (and vice versa) more than the redemptive influence of the church on society (and vice versa).[33] Secondly, Niebuhr sometimes suggested that "external" views of the church necessarily distort their object.[34] And thirdly, one notices an absence in Niebuhr's writings of the use of sociology to analyze the functioning of relationships WITHIN the ecclesiastical institution, an area in which that discipline has considerable competence. These observations may suggest that, despite his theoretical basis for using sociology and theology in mutually illuminative fashion, he nevertheless

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[32] Cf. Niebuhr, "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," loc. cit.; The Meaning of Revelation, op. cit.; The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, op. cit.; "The Churches and the Body of Christ," loc. cit., et al.

[33] Two notable exceptions are The Kingdom of God in America and "The Concept of the Covenant in American Democracy."

[34] Cf. The Kingdom of God in America, op. cit.; "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," loc. cit.; "The Norm of the Church," loc. cit.; "The Protestant Movement and Democracy in the United States," op. cit.

emphasizes the negative and judgmental content of the external view and thus does not "really" accord it full significance as an analytical of the church. Yet this suggestion remains unconvincing for three reasons.

First, Niebuhr was a theologian by profession and NOT a sociologist. Thus his role in the dialogue between disciplines is to take the findings of external (sociological) views and to interpret them in light of the church's ultimate relationship, the divine activity. If the findings of sociology show the church to be a corrupting influence on society and vice versa, then these findings must be embraced by theology and shown to have an ultimate context as well as one which is penultimate. But theology cannot dictate in advance that particular institutional expressions of Christianity are "bound" to have an influence on culture which it would regard as "positive." Its task is rather to discern the divine activity of creation, judgment and redemption in WHATEVER processes occur in history.[35] Thus Niebuhr could not be faulted for taking the findings of the external views of his day and

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[35]Niebuhr's own best example of working in this fashion came in his analysis of World War II wherein he discerned both judgment and redemption in process.

interpreting the data thus provided. Whether that data be "positive" or "negative," the task of the theologian is the same: to set it within its ultimate context and to witness to the divine activity.

Secondly, even if the available findings of external views of the church were selected by Niebuhr so as to stress the "negative" relationship between church and society, he might nevertheless justify his choice on the grounds that the ecclesiastical institution was self-satisfied and needed to be faced with its own corruption. Such a decision would not represent a departure from his conversionism at all, but would reflect his concern as a theologian to be of service to the church in its particular situation.

Finally, Niebuhr gave the theoretical basis for a cogent relating of two views of the church; he pointed out in practice how that might occur;[36] and he wholeheartedly endorsed the work of Gustafson for whom sociology functioned most "positively." Indeed, when Gustafson analyzed the church from the point of view of sociology, Niebuhr endorsed it enthusiastically as

> . . . the first real sociology of the church . . . it has corrected for me many of my misapprehensions.

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[36] E.g., "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight."

> I think it presents us with a new beginning for self-understanding in the church.[37]

Furthermore, Gustafson himself acknowledged that "Parts of this book are no more than an elaboration of ideas he (Niebuhr) has expressed."[38]

One could hardly expect more of him that this: a cautious and critical appropriation of the work of external viewers of the church while working out the theoretical basis on which such an appropriation might proceed.

The significance of this schema for the task of church renewal is immense. For a new resource has been provided it--the discipline of sociology. Niebuhr has provided a conception in which the findings of sociology may be included within an internal or theological view of the church without losing their integrity. The function of the church within its penultimate context is included as a necessary part of an analysis of its function within its ultimate context precisely because the ultimate context includes and gives significance to the penultimate. Yet the resulting view remains finite and receptive to the conversion of the gospel which makes that finite and relative view transparent to that which is infinite and absolute.

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[37] Niebuhr, "Dust Jacket Introduction" to Treasure in Earthen Vessels, by James M. Gustafson, op. cit.

[38] Gustafson, ibid., p. xi.

For the practical churchman, it means that he can draw freely on the insights of sociology in devising a program of reform--such insights as the nature and functioning of bureaucracy, the social influence of voluntary associations, the function of symbolic activity in communities, etc., --without fear of selling out to alien values. The external views of the church become a methodological resource for embodying faith in culture rather than an occasion for self-flagellation and despair. And that is no small transformation. But it is the reflection once more of the dialectic of divine sovereignty. Neither external nor internal views of the church are absolute; but as part of the created order, they are both good.

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