

REINHOLD NEIBUHR AND THE COMPLEXITIES OF ADDRESSING INJUSTICE

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In his book Moral Man and Immoral Society Neibuhr is looking at the arena of ethics and addressing the problem of injustice. He lays out his basic presuppositions. First, people are social beings. He says that "society in which each man lives is at once the basis for, and the nemesis of, that fulness of life which each man seeks,"(pag.1) He also insists that while individuals in their most intimate relationships have the capacity for moral action, it is "one of the tragedies of the human spirit" that it (the human spirit) is unable to "conform its collective life to its individual ideals." (pg. 9) He lays out the thesis of the book: "The problem which society faces is clearly one of reducing force by increasing the factors which make for a moral and rational adjustment of life to life; of bringing such force as is still necessary under responsibility of the whole of society; of destroying the kind of power which cannot be made socially responsible (the power which resides in economic ownership for instance); and of bringing forces of moral self-restraint to bear upon types of power which can never be brought completely under social control."(pg. 20) "Future peace and justice of society therefore depend upon, not one but many, social strategies, in all of which moral and coercive factors are compounded in varying degrees."(pg. 21) In my judgement Neibuhr is being courageous enough to deal with the most pressing and most complex issue of our era, still current with many new and urgent manifestations; he does it responsibly and in depth giving us a comprehensive overview of this vital historical question, laying out the interacting roles, the accompanying attitudes, and alternative options in such a way as to leave the reader dramatically awakened and educated, with an imperative to act, knowing that not to act is to participate in the systems of injustice.

Neibuhr is a pragmatist. He is interested only in the real, therefore he points out the illusory. He is interested in action, not theory in and of itself or idle talk, and he insists upon history being the judge. I would say that Neibuhr's book offers hope; for how can a problem be adequately addressed without realistically coming to grips with what it's all about? He lays a foundation upon which individuals, groups or even institutions can build to participate in creating a new possibility for future humanity-- a possibility of peace, justice and the access of all to the resources of the world.

The interacting roles in this drama of injustice are that of the powerful or privileged, the middle class or bourgeoisie, and the dispossessed or proletariat. Those with power almost always act out of self interest. They are not want to openly reveal this, so their actions are characterized by "universal self-deception and hypocrisy." (pg. 117) Whether it is landowners, factory owners, statesmen, judges, (or church hierarchy), the tendency always is to clothe actions with a garb of impartiality, fairness, and good will while underneath and actual is the protection of self interest and privilege, and these even come to be considered their "rights." Moreover, in this drama, if one group of empowered people are confronted and have their powers removed, the ones who removed that power and now possess it, forget the powerless and again act in the pattern of the privileged. Neibuhr sees the most responsible or decisive power as being that in the hands of the economic chiefs of society. They govern society either directly or indirectly. The middle class tend to be characterized by liberalism, religious idealism, or rational moralism. They generally believe, if they think about it, that hope lies with not 'shaking the tree;' that the status quo is better than unknown change, that violence is inherently evil, and that good will, prayer and love within the individual realm will permeate the corporate to transform

whatever is evil or inadequate and make it good. In terms of religious leanings, Neibuhr affirms the "truly" religious, saying that their sense of the absolute "qualifies the will-to-live and the will-to-power by bringing them under subjection to an absolute will, and by imparting transcendent value to other human beings, whose life and needs thus achieve a higher claim upon the self." (pg. 63) If he does not allow his love to fall into sentimentality, his understanding of eternal life to make him indifferent to social ills, his passion for service to be collapsed by the real limitations dictated by "the size of communities... the impersonal and indirect character of social relations...and the complexity of the situation," (pg. 73) and if he will rout out his own hypocrisy and be open and sensitive to the real disparities of society -- then the middle class may be able to play a positive role in this drama. But mostly Neibuhr believes "he does not suffer enough, in his comfortable position, from the brutality of collective man, fully to understand his dominant impulses." (pg. 178) The hope for the future Neibuhr places squarely in the hands of the dispossessed. These people have not found "individual morality qualifying the dominant greed and lust to power of privileged groups to any appreciable degree." (pg. 177) So they have become moral cynics. These people have not land or position or adequate job. Many believe in economic determinism or Marxism which makes "the degradation of the proletariat the cause of his ultimate exaltation," finds "in the very disaster of his social defeat the harbinger of his final victory," and sees "in his loss of all property the future of a civilization in which no one will have privileges of property." (pg. 154) These people suffer the brutalities of the conflict of power, but have the possibility through collective action of enabling change, because the pain itself motivates and sustains this struggle.

The two major courses of action that Neibuhr describes in detail are revolution and parliamentary action. Socialism is amenable to either, and when one recognizes that coercion, overt or covert, accompanies group relations, then revolution with violence is not necessarily ruled out. In my own thinking a brief period of violence may injure fewer people in the end and produce radical change for the end of justice faster than peaceable means. I think this was Mao's contention in China and I am not unconvinced of its validity. Centuries of death by starvation to millions upon millions can be changed to new systems of access through a few years of "blood-letting." This seems callous, but is it if a nation of people move from the misery of subsistence to the vitality given by adequacy? I favor the methods of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., but for me, revolution is not ruled out. Parliamentary procedure, or justice through political force, is another, generally slower, avenue for socialism. Here workers diminish and abridge the social privilege and power of the wealthy through the process of law. England and the Scandinavian countries represent this approach, as does the United States to a lesser degree. The principal mechanism used is taxation of property and luxury. In most places taxation has also come to mean the taking away of whatever increased economic power the poorest might have secured, through sales taxes. The achievement of consensus to equalize the distribution of wealth and resources through law is very difficult to come by, and even more difficult to implement. Though Neibuhr maintains that the brunt of the responsibility lies with the workers, he does not exclude the participation of others. The initiative and knowledge of the educated, the social sensitivity of the religious (or non-religious) of the middle and empowered classes may also play a role. Neibuhr says there is an "element of voluntary

acceptance of the new social standard because it appeals to the community as a logical and inevitable extension of previously accepted political and social principles. The fact that a very considerable amount of social legislation was passed in all modern nations before the labor parties gained their full strength, and sometimes even before they existed, reveals the capacity of the general community to recognize minimum social needs." (pg. 207)

Neibuhr does not propose a solution to this problem of injustice so much as he points to a direction. In the midst of the conflict between the needs of society and the imperatives of a sensitive conscience the seemingly irreconcilable elements associated one hand with a just society and on the other hand by individual integrity may be integrated by application of rational moralism, implies Neibuhr. Rationalism would place appropriate social restraints on altruism and inner restraints on egoism. It would force political realism on the idealistic and keep the needs of the oppressed visible to the rest of society. In its interplay between the individualistic ethic of duty and social utilitarianism it would release the motivation of individual benevolence and curb the self-gratifying forces of those in power.

The scene can be played out this way. The individual seeking to live a moral life becomes conscious of societal disease -- that those who live in poverty are structurally unable to get the education, the employment, the health, that would place them or their next generation into a position above marginal living. This individual may want to do something about it, but the systems or structures contain the infection of manipulating to protect the power that is. The radical action that may be seemingly called for in this situation would be unsavory to this individual. He/she would not want to wade into the corruption and ever increasing mire and complexity of evil that might threaten the well-being, the status or privilege of that one's own family and loved ones as well as self. This person might conceivably give gifts to the poor and support causes financially as a way of absolving the guilt and of doing 'something.' But unless some persons take upon themselves the responsibility to act corporately to discern the strategies that would bring the needed change, and give their beings to it, bringing to bear political pressures where that is appropriate, spirit motivation where that is needed, constantly assessing the journey and remaneuvering, putting power into the hands of persons with the capacity to lead well and with wisdom, articulating the sustaining, effective philosophy, holding accountability of all in power, doing the mundane activities as well as those that gain publicity -- unless a committed people act in consensus in this way to address the contradiction, while living before a vision of a 'reconciled' or more just society, effective, long-range change cannot happen. This is the way I interpret what Neibuhr is suggesting. We must do battle with "malignant power and spiritual wickedness in high places." (pg. 277) We must have a vision -- which may even be "madness," if we are to participate in the task of redemption. And he urges that it is necessary that we do.

I would like to conclude this paper with a dialogue of questions that Neibuhr has raised for me and questions that I would ask of Neibuhr. The questions that come from my reading his ethical discussion are:

- (1) Is my theology too idealistic?
- (2) Must I as an individual act in a structured way through groups if I am concerned for social justice?

- (3) How should the church, as an historical institution charged with the salvation and reconciliation of the world, relate to socialism?
- (4) What are the practical, concrete steps required to move the world toward global peace and justice? He has given us the strategies, what are the implementaries?

These are questions that I feel I must wrestle with as a responsible student of Neibuhr.

Then there are the questions I would ask him if he were here.

- (1) If my long range good is to survive as a human family is it not to my (and other individuals') personal advantage to seek peace and equality?
- (2) If so, is not education a key, both for allowing people to become self-conscious to that advantage and for discerning the methods?
- (3) Is not the establishment of consensus-making mechanisms that bring in the voice of the proletariat a more practically feasible reality with the computer-information age than previously?
- (4) Would you agree that the movements associated with liberation theology in Latin America have made significant strides in the direction of justice? (Though not enough.)
- (5) With the changes that have come about in these last years of the technological revolution, where perhaps 10% of the population can do all of the production necessary for all of the peoples of the world, will another, other than economic, dynamic become the dominant force about which to be concerned in terms of justice?
- (6) In the face of present day increased threat of annihilation, the coercive forces of local and national labor movements are inadequate for requiring justice of multi-national companies and affluent nations. What coercive mechanisms would you now suggest?
- (7) About the title, is it a gimmick to convey the reality of the intensifying complexity of ethics when moving from the individual to the group level? Is it inferring that subsequent generations hold moral responsibility for their forefathers "to the 7th generation?" If it is intended to convey definitional information, how can society be termed 'immoral' when society as an entity has no self or center?

*Who answer  
the computer?*

*This is an excellent paper.  
Very well written.  
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