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A STUDY IN THE THEOLOGY OF CHRISTIAN SOCIAL ACTION:

An Examination of the Works of Walter Rauschenbusch and Reinhold Niebuhr and of the Approaches to the Problem which they represent

by

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submitted in partial requirement for the fulfillment of the Senior Scholar Program

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In the early stages of the development of this Senior Scholar paper, several problems arose which subsequently led to an alteration in the original plan of the project. The first problem was that of acquiring an adequate orientation to the general problems of Christian Social Action; this phase of the study required more time than I had allotted for it, which meant that insufficient time was spent in studying the theology of Rauschenbusch. Another problem presented itself at the end of the project, when it became apparent that there would not be time for me to evaluate my own theological position in relation to Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr, nor to develop thoroughly my conclusions about Christian Social Action. As a satisfactory solution to these problems, it was proposed that I should submit as my final report to the Senior Scholars Committee an abbreviated form of my original project. In this paper, therefore, I have attempted to present a summary of my exposition of the theology of these two men, and of my own understanding of the issues of Christian Social Action. I have tried to reproduce in this short space the thought of these men, in a manner which should make it comprehensible, and which should relate it to the larger questions of social action.

This year's work as a Senior Scholar has proved valuable because of the new field of thought into which I was introduced; it has proved invaluable because of
the discipline of self-directed study which the work taught, and because of the myriad possibilities of future investigation which it has suggested. I hope that someday this present manuscript may be expanded into something more substantial. The personal value of such a project, in my opinion, must be measured by the contribution which the project makes to the individual's general experience, and not merely by the written work which is produced. Therefore, although this manuscript is rather brief, it represents a great deal of value which I feel that I can measure only by my own experience.
Summary of Walter Rauschenbusch: OUTLINE

I    General Introduction and Orientation

II. The Theology of Walter Rauschenbusch: The Kingdom of God

   A. The new conception of the Kingdom of God.
      1. An evolutionary interpretation
      2. A social re-orientation
      3. The fulfillment of the Kingdom ideal

   B. Its relation to the ethic of Jesus
      1. To the teachings of Jesus
      2. To the life of Jesus

   C. Its relation to the purpose of Christianity

   D. Its relation to the concept of sin
      1. The nature of society
      2. The nature of man
      3. The sinfulness of the social order
      4. The sinfulness of man
      5. A plea for a Christian consciousness of sin

   E. Its relation to the unChristian elements of society: to Capitalism and to Business

   F. Its relation to the concepts of grace and salvation

   G. As the source of the Church's inspiration and salvation
The significance of Walter Rauschenbusch lies not in his writings themselves, but in the effect which they had in inspiring and directing the growth of American theology in the early twentieth century. Therefore, the ideas which are expressed in this analysis of his thought are not only characteristic of a single man, but are usually representative of the theology of the Social Gospel Movement as well. A brief orientation to his thought and writings at the outset may help make the substance of his theology more readily intelligible.

It is difficult to do justice to both the unity and the variety of Rauschenbusch's thought. He deals with such a multiplicity of topics that the task of trying to mention all of them within the scope of this paper is a somewhat hopeless one. He often writes with such a passion for the issue at hand that he fails to develop his ideas thoroughly or to assume a position which is consistent with his stand on a previous issue. However, the essential unity of his theology is provided by a single concept, that of the Kingdom of God.

The writings of Rauschenbusch are characterized throughout by an enthusiasm and a concern for social problems which are communicated even through the medium of the written word. This unmistakable vitality is
uncrossingly generated by his religious faith, and is as typical of the Movement which he represents as any particular concept. The unique contribution of Rauschenbusch and of the Social Gospel Movement to theology was this attempt to redirect this vitality toward social issues, an attempt which was accompanied by great enthusiasm and by an abiding awareness of man's social responsibility.

Thus, it is also characteristic of his writings that they deal primarily with particular social problems — unemployment, poverty, disease etc.; however, his presuppositions are religious. Rauschenbusch seldom attempts to analyze the ideas of other great men and apply them to these social conditions; his approach is more direct, and leads him to write about the conditions as he sees them in the light of his interpretation of the Christian faith. His books and his thought are oriented toward society and its problems, rather than toward theology; his technique is to evaluate existing social conditions according to criteria which he considers Christian, rather than to examine earlier theology in order to define his own position.

Finally, Rauschenbusch's style is hardly "finished" or highly polished. It is straightforward in its purpose and simple in its structure. His writing is usually colloquial, and there is an occasional passage which is remarkably effective in conveying his meaning.
to the reader because of vividness of the image which he creates. There is also an emotional factor in his style which cannot be disregarded, for it appeals to the sympathies of the reader rather than to his intellect alone. Much of Rauschenbusch's popularity as a writer and of his influence as a theologian is due to the appeal which his style had for the reading public -- for the laymen in all walks of life.

II

Let us turn our attention now to an analysis of the five most important books of Walter Rauschenbusch and to a consideration of the main theological concepts which he elaborates there. My outline for this project is an arbitrary one and may perhaps present Rauschenbusch in a rather different light than does his own writing; but it serves the purpose of interrelating his ideas in a manner in which he never did, and of developing implications of his thought which he failed to do. This summary is more concerned with the important concepts and the total orientation of his theology than with any specific ideas which may appear in his books.

The Kingdom of God is the one concept in his theology which provides a sense of unity. It is the one idea with which he is ultimately concerned; and because it is, it represents the position from which he views other concepts and all situations. All other
ideas gain their significance from this one single doctrine: and it gives a sense of meaning and a direction to all human tasks, however small.

A. Rauschenbusch's view of the Kingdom of God does not need to be elaborated here, for it will become clear as its relation to the rest of his theology is examined. There are only three details which should be mentioned in order to demonstrate the distinctiveness of this doctrine as he conceived it.

1. For Rauschenbusch, the Kingdom of God was an evolutionary concept, an attitude which he based upon his interpretation of Jesus's view. This meant that the Kingdom was neither "other-worldly" nor "catastrophic": it already existed in, and would attain its fulfillment in, the societies of this world; and also that this fulfillment would be attained not by a sudden and complete reorganization of society, but rather through a gradual process of growth. The implications of this view are important for his view of social action, for it means that man has a significant role to play in this evolutionary process, and that there is hope for men in every social situation because God's purposes are gradually being fulfilled in society.

2. This last point is the second qualification which Rauschenbusch makes of earlier ideas of the Kingdom of God: it is a social ideal. In his own words, "the
Kingdom of God involved the social transformation of humanity." \(^{(1)}\) But the Kingdom of God is more than just a social ideal: it is a social reality. It has been present in society since Jesus initiated it in his life, and is at all times working toward its ultimate fulfillment. Certain parts of the social order are even now under the influence of this reality; and the Kingdom is moving gradually toward its final realization as all parts of that order come under its rule. Man's responsibility is to participate in this process.

**3.** The outcome of this evolution is never doubtful. Rauschenbusch does maintain that the process of the transformation of society into the Kingdom of God is a slow one. Obviously, the establishment of the Kingdom is not yet complete; but certain social advances can definitely be seen to contribute to the speeding up of the process. The apparent pessimism and discouragement which are the result of this view are redeemed by the assertion that the fulfillment of the process is assured. God has a hand in the evolving Kingdom, and will never permit the ultimate frustration of his designs. Rauschenbusch's conception of the Kingdom of God, therefore, is an optimistic one.

**B.** The Kingdom of God, according to Rauschenbusch, embraces both the teachings and the life of Jesus,

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\(^{(1)}\) *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, p. 162.
borrowing certain elements from them, but also giving to them their real significance. It hardly needs to be mentioned, however, that the relation between the concept of the Kingdom and the ethic of Jesus is dependent upon Rauschenbusch's particular interpretation of the latter.

1. There are two very important ways in which the concept of the Kingdom is related to the teachings of Jesus. Most obvious, of course, is the fact that this same concept was the central teaching of Jesus himself. According to Rauschenbusch, Jesus made several significant changes in the doctrine as it had existed previously, and emphasized certain facts: the developmental, rather than the catastrophic, aspect; the Kingdom as a present reality; the fulfillment of the Kingdom as a "new society," and not an agglomeration of regenerated individuals; the universal nature of the Kingdom; and the presence of God as the One who had created and who would fulfill the process of its growth. Rauschenbusch adopted most of these items and incorporated them into his view of the Kingdom of God.

But his indebtedness to the teachings of Jesus extends beyond this fact: his view of the Kingdom also includes the fundamental ethical principles of Jesus: love, service, and equality. These are not only the highest ethical ideals (as he interprets Jesus), nor only the ultimate standards by which human behavior is
is to be judged; they represent the ideals which will be realized when the Kingdom of God exists in its completion. If men would only act as though these principles were already present realities, their behavior would then be the same as if the Kingdom had come; and, indeed, the Kingdom would be that much closer to fulfillment. Thus, Rauschenbusch's concept of the Kingdom includes the most important elements of Jesus's teaching, his supreme ethical standards as well as his fundamental doctrine.

2. The very life of Jesus was another block which Rauschenbusch used in his construction of the Kingdom concept, for Jesus initiated the Kingdom as a reality within his personality. By meeting and fulfilling the highest standards of behavior -- love, service, and equality -- Jesus realized the demands of the Kingdom. Jesus was thus a revelation of God's love: by the nature of love in his character, and by the originating of the Kingdom of God in his life. Rauschenbusch defines the character of Jesus as divine, because it reveals to us the knowledge of the God who is our Father; and as social because he exemplifies the ideals by which all men should live. Finally, however, the life of Jesus receives its identification with the other elements in Rauschenbusch's theology in two ways: it is God who initiates the Kingdom in Christ; and the ideals by which Jesus lived are also those according to which the perfect society will be organized.
6. The purpose of Christianity is also closely related to the Kingdom of God as Rauschenbusch defines both of these concepts. That purpose is, finally, both social and ethical; it is concerned with human behavior in social situations. As Rauschenbusch defines the ultimate purpose of Christianity in the introduction to his first book, it is possible to observe quite carefully its relation to the Kingdom of God. Anticipating the study of the origins of social Christianity which he makes in the early part of the book, he says:

The outcome of these first historical chapters is that the essential purpose of Christianity was to transform human society into the Kingdom of God by re-generating all human relations and reconstituting them in accordance with the will of God.\(^{(2)}\)

The fulfillment of that purpose and the coming of the Kingdom of God are therefore one and the same thing. Rauschenbusch's teachings on the Kingdom are not overshadowed by his conception of Christian purpose; rather, those teachings assume new significance by being the very goal toward which all Christianity should be striving.

The social and ethical orientation of that purpose is sharpened by Rauschenbusch's emphasis upon human relations. He also diverges from most historical formulations of the doctrine of the Kingdom by asserting

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\(^{(2)}\) Ibid., p. xiii.
that this is the purpose of Christianity, rather than the salvation of individuals; he makes the goal social instead of personal. Rauschenbusch believed that unless this or any other religion could create new religious personalities and transform society into an integrated social unit, it could not justify its existence.

Having thus identified the purpose of Christianity with the Kingdom of God, he proceeds to call the process of growth toward the Kingdom -- which is the same process by which the purpose is achieved -- "Christianizing the social order." As the existing social order is progressively transformed under the influence of the Kingdom ideal (and reality) it undergoes that change which Rauschenbusch calls a Christianizing process. The attainment of the purpose of Christianity depends upon the extension of this process throughout all social and personal relationships, and is synonymous with the fulfillment of the Kingdom.

Although the eventual outcome is not in doubt, Rauschenbusch warns men that the process is an infinitely slow one and challenges them to speed up this task of Christianization. Men must not lose faith, for faith is required to hasten the process; men must not hesitate to act, for action is nevertheless important for the result.
D. The area in which the dependence of other elements of his theology upon the Kingdom of God is perhaps most vividly revealed, is in the discussion of the nature of sin. This doctrine is in turn a consequence of Rauschenbusch's interpretation of the nature of man and of society, where a further relation to the Kingdom concept can be noticed.

1. Rauschenbusch's interpretation of the nature of society can be contained within a single descriptive adjective: "organic." He acknowledges the source and the nature of his belief in the following passage.

Paul's philosophy of the Christian Church is the highest possible philosophy of human society... The ideal society, he said, has an unlimited diversity of organs and functions, but a fundamental unity of life, motive, and purpose... The ideal society is an organism. (3)

Two implications of this view are important, for his concept of the nature of man, and for the relation of the Kingdom to society.

If the highest type of society is an organism, the most righteous and virtuous behavior of individuals must be that which contributes to such an organization; therefore, in a perfect society all men would be perfectly social -- i.e., selfless. If this is truly the highest level of ethical behavior, then whatever

(3) I Corinthians, chapter 12; also Christianizing the Social Order, p. 366.
opposes it must in some measure be an evil. Rauschenbusch
does, indeed, draw these inferences from his view of
society, in a manner which will be more carefully
investigated later.

Moreover, if such is the nature of the perfect
society, then this must be a description of the Kingdom
of God. It must be an organization of society in which
human individuality contributes to the unity of the
whole and does not detract from it through the pursuit
of private goals. Since the Kingdom of God is still
in the process of being established, the present society
must be in a condition which is somewhat less than
ideal—a fact which Rauschenbusch is able to state
directly from his observations rather than from the
logical procession of his ideas. His view of society
then, is that it provides the environment within which
the Kingdom of God will be established, although it
must remain imperfect until the establishment of the
Kingdom, which is the perfect society. The ultimate
reality of the Kingdom of God is therefore the standard
by which all existing social orders can be judged as
inadequate; and it is also the pattern according to
which all societies should be organized.

There is one further element in Rauschenbusch's
view of society which deserves attention here—the
existence of "super-personal forces." Modern sociologists
have attempted to explain this phenomenon in terms of
a "group mind" and in similar concepts. For Rauschenbusch they appear particularly important because they shape the lives of individuals and the organization of society even beyond the influence of the individuals within the group.

These super-personal forces count in the moral world not only through their authority over their members, but through their influence in the general social life...They are the most powerful ethical forces in our communities. (4)

The true significance will be seen when the concept of social sin in the theology of Rauschenbusch is examined. Since these forces are so effective in determining the lives of the members of the social groups, it is of crucial importance whether they are for good or evil.

2. "Our personality is of divine and eternal value, but we see it aright only when we see it as part of mankind. Our religious individuality must get its interpretation from the supreme fact of social solidarity." (5)

Thus Rauschenbusch points to one facet of the nature of man which he considers extremely important: man is social by nature, and achieves his full stature only as he participates in the social organism. The ideal of man as a social creature is substantiated by the ideal of society as an organism, in the thought of Rauschenbusch. This is also the relation

(4) A Theology for the Social Gospel, p. 72.
of the Kingdom of God to the nature of man, since his social nature can be truly appreciated only in a society which is so organized that his individual talents and purposes find their fulfillment in the larger purposes of the community.

Unfortunately for man, this is not the only aspect of his nature. According to Rauschenbusch, man is also essentially selfish, so that these two forces are in constant conflict within every mature individual. As men come under the rule of those principles which were designated by Jesus as the highest -- love, service, and equality -- they become Christian through their success in subjecting the less virtuous, egocistic tendencies. In the Kingdom of God, this anti-social disposition is held in constant check by the sense of responsibility to the social organism; in man's sinful condition, the selfishness is predominant.

Neither of these aspects of man's nature can be considered, however, without the recognition of the fact that his nature is more complex than the previous discussion would seem to indicate. Man is dependent for his true personality upon his relation to God. There is a need for the presence of God which exists as strongly in man as the selfish aspect of his nature and the social aspect of his nature. It is this which leads man to seek God and to desire personal righteousness and immortality; and it is
this which causes man to feel a sense of guilt when he attempts to deny God or to live without Him.

Rauschenbusch does not make explicit the fact which ultimately characterizes man's relation to God, although he assumes that fact in his discussion of Jesus as the revelation of God: all men are children of the same God, who exists in a constant personal relationship to them.

From this preceding paragraph, it should have become obvious that man is not self-sufficient, and that he is dependent upon a force outside himself for the fulfillment of his personality. As a final aspect of the nature of man, Rauschenbusch mentions the fact that religion is an eternal need of humanity. Man's relation to religion is a two-way process, moreover, since religious faith must find its expression in the daily life and the personal relationships of men, as their contribution to the advancement of God's Kingdom. The nature of man realizes its potentialities for social concern and social service only when it remains in its most intimate relation to religion; this is particularly true when the object of one's religious faith is the God of love, and the purpose of that faith is to transform the existing society into the Kingdom of God.
In conclusion, then, the nature of man consists of a complex personality, in which animal instincts and divine urges co-exist. It is also a social nature; man was not made to live alone, and his highest nature is attained when he sacrifices himself to the end of the ideal social organism -- the Kingdom of God. Man's divine nature is best revealed when he is able to experience his relationship to God, for it is in this act that his life gains its proper significance. Man's social nature is exalted when he is in contact with his religion for it is only then that one of his basic needs is being fulfilled, and only then that his social relationships receive the inspiration of God.

3. Rauschenbusch's elaboration of his concept of sin is two-fold, dealing with the sins of both society and the individual. Although it may seem odd to speak of society as sinful, this is actually one of the most important concepts in the theology which he develops for Social Gospel. Society sins, in the first instance, because the conditions which it provides for the nurture of its members fail to meet the standards of a Christian Social order. It is actually impossible for an individual to be completely righteous when large segments of the social order are arrayed against him.
Rauschenbusch carries his analysis of social evil a step beyond this, however. Recalling the "super-personal forces" which were so prominent in his view of the nature of society, he attributes the presence of such extensive evil in the social order to the presence of organized forces which work in opposition to the Kingdom of God. This is the Kingdom of Evil, a permanent and effective force in society which obstructs the establishment of God's Kingdom on earth. The strength of this Kingdom of Evil can be seen where it is at work in small gangs of delinquents and in fascistic tendencies of nations. The effect of the "super-personal forces" which are generated by this other Kingdom are quite obviously evil; it demands all of the resources of the Kingdom of God -- or rather, of those elements of the social order which have already been Christianized -- to combat this evil.

The relation of the Kingdom concept to the doctrine of sin is apparent. It stands opposed to the Kingdom of Evil at every point and upon every issue, and is working to overcome this arch-enemy as more and more of the sections of society are Christianized. Moreover, the Kingdom of Evil will continue to have its effect on those whom it is able to reach until the entire social order is transformed permanently into the perfect society.
4. Sin on a personal basis is essentially selfishness, although this assumes many forms. On the most intimate level, this is of course the tendency of men to assert their own interests in disregard of the interests of others. On a higher plane, it is man's attempt to frustrate the process of Christianizing the social order, either by open defiance of the Kingdom of God, or by refusing to assume personal responsibility of working for its fulfillment. The most serious sin of which man is continually guilty is that expression of his selfishness which attempts to deny the nature of God and His relation to the world: to deny his dependency upon anyone but himself alone; and to deny any personal responsibility for his sins. Ultimately, man's personal sins are due to the fact that he is out of touch with God and His purposes, and therefore he fails to realize the demands which the Kingdom of God makes upon him.

5. To Rauschenbusch, the Christian view of the nature of sin is best expressed, not in theological terms, but in active opposition to those attitudes which it regards as sinful. Men would be more Christian if they were less concerned with ideas about evil and were more conscious of the fact of sin, in their lives and in their environment.
They can not be going far wrong if they take the attitude taken by the Hebrew prophets and by Jesus himself, concentrating their energies on the present and active sources of evil and leaving the question of the first origin of evil to God. 

This is the consciousness of sin to which Rauschenbusch would have all men attain, an attitude of concern toward all manifestations of sin in the society around us, and a comparative disregard for theological speculation on its ultimate nature. The task of Christianizing the social order would be greatly facilitated if all men would face it with a profound conviction of the nature of sin as it has been defined, and especially as it appears in the Kingdom of Evil. This view is the challenge which Rauschenbusch wished every person to confront in his personal life, as the test of a true Christian.

E. The relation of the Kingdom of God to Capitalism and to Business can be dismissed without too detailed an analysis. These two forces represent the most frequent targets of Rauschenbusch's verbal barrages. They are not only parts of society which have not yet been Christianized; but they belong to the Kingdom of Evil and are constantly working to thwart the efforts of all Christianizing forces and influences. Capitalism holds this undesirable position not

(6) A Theology For the Social Gospel, p. 44.
only because it emphasizes selfish over social motives, but moreso because it is a cause of social evil. The purpose of this section can best be fulfilled by quoting a substantial section from the original manuscript.

The final indictment of Capitalism is that it is a cause of social evil on three counts:

1. It denies the Christian conception of society as an organism, in which all men are of equal dignity and the work of every man is a function necessary to the solidarity of society.

2. It substitutes for the laws of love and service a standard of selfishness: self-interest, self-dependence, and self-advancement. Not only does this standard contradict the ideal of the Christian social order, but it finds expression in a spirit of materialism which also contradicts the ideal of the Kingdom of God.

3. By its very aims and its business methods, Capitalism represents a powerful and active organization which at nearly every point opposes the Christianizing influences in society. It is the Kingdom of Evil which is waging an active campaign against the Kingdom of God; if it is not conquered by the Christian forces, it will overcome them.
F. The two concepts of grace and salvation are also intimately related to the doctrine of the Kingdom of God as it has been elaborated so far. According to Rauschenbusch, two fundamental facts are included in the nature of grace. God's grace involves no idea of merit on the part of man; it is freely given and man does not have to earn it. Indeed, this gift is made even more valuable by man's unfitness to receive it and by his inability to earn it. Secondly, the readiness with which grace is imparted is dependent on the very nature of God. If the redemptive and unifying and creative power of love lies in its capacity to forgive, (7) then the God of Love must be able to redeem His children, to unite them in obedience to the law of love, and to create in them new religious personalities. Because he is the God of love, He is also the God of grace.

As Rauschenbusch uses the term salvation, it carries many implications which are missing from the ordinary use of the term. For him, salvation is a social process, in two very distinct ways. The individual must be saved within -- and with -- the social order, or he cannot be saved at all.

(7) See Christianity and the Social Crisis, p. 68.
Rauchenbusch criticizes the commonly accepted connotations of salvation because they imply that its only goal is personal immortality, or escape from the social situation. Salvation as a social process means that a person is still prone to the same faults and errors after his conversion, unless these can be removed by transforming the society. It means, secondly, that the end of the process of salvation is the perfect society: salvation will be complete when the Kingdom of God is established.

Because it expanded the area of the consciousness of sin to include an understanding of the sinfulness of the social order, the Social Gospel showed the inadequacy of an individualistic gospel to cope with the situation. According to Rauchenbusch, something more is needed -- perhaps a social sense of grace. Because of the solidarity of society, salvation and the sense of forgiveness which is the consequence of grace must both involve social manifestations; they must produce some obvious results within the individual in his relation to his environment. If the whole social order were transformed, then all men would have been saved and would not lapse back into sinfulness through the influence of that society. Moreover, such a saved society can itself be a means of grace, according to Rauchenbusch, by imparting a sense of the nature and the goodness of God.
G. The function of the Church will be considered more carefully in its relation to the problem of Christian Social Action, but needs to be mentioned here because of its natural relation to the preceding topics. This institution bears the major part of the responsibility for the task of Christianizing the social order; but if it is to meet this challenge successfully, it must be inspired with a new life and spirit. If the Church is to become an effective means of changing personalities and of transforming society, it must first be saved itself.

Rauschenbusch is quick to caution the reader that he does not mean the Church is the only agency of salvation, either personal or social; if the Church takes this position, it commits a grievous sin. He does look to the Church, however, as the most important among those institutions which are engaged in the task of Christianizing society. Before it can become a channel of salvation, the Church must gain its own salvation. This it must do in the same manner as individuals, by subordinating its own aims and purposes and methods to those of the Kingdom of God. By dedicating its activities and its spirit to the promotion of God's Kingdom, the Church can
wield its influence more righteously and can become the most effective agent of social salvation; but, to Rauschenbusch, it can do this only through such a consecration.

While by no means complete, this resume of the most important concepts in the theology of Walter Rauschenbusch has given a fairly valid impression of their interrelationships and their interdependence. The actual spirit in which Rauschenbusch did most of his writings has, for the most part, been lost in the emphasis upon his ideas. However, it is probably a more concise and more accurate picture of his theological presuppositions and attitudes than he ever put into a written form.
Summary of Niebuhr:

I  General Introduction and Orientation

II  The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr: A Philosophy of History

   A. Elements of the Hebrew prophetic tradition which are significant for his interpretation of history
      1. The conviction of meaningfulness
      2. The use of myth
      3. The prophetic conception of the nature of God
      4. Levels of their Messianic expectations

   B. The contributions of the ethic and the character of Jesus Christ to Niebuhr's interpretation of history
      1. The ethic of Jesus
      2. Jesus' teachings on the nature of history and of the "eschata"
      3. The meaning of Christ

   C. The relation of the purpose of Christianity to the meaning of history

III  The Fundamental Problem of Christian Theology: Niebuhr's Concept of Sin

   A. The nature of man
      1. The relation of man to history
      2. Man "in the image of God"

   B. The nature of society
      1. The organization of society
      2. The nature of social relationships
      3. Power and special privilege: the sources of conflict
      4. The use of coercion: the nature of conflict
      5. The ideal of a perfect society and its possibilities

   C. The nature of human sin: unbelief
      1. The doctrine of original sin
      2. The doctrine of original justice
      3. Sin as pride
      4. Sin as sensuality

   D. Resolving the paradox of sinfulness
      1. The doctrine of salvation
      2. The doctrine of grace
      3. Problems raised by the concept of grace
There is already evidence that the influence of Walter Rauschenbusch on American theology, as great as it was, may be surpassed by that of Reinhold Niebuhr. Uncountably the most profound theologian to appear in this country during the twentieth century, the latter is perhaps the most outstanding theologian in American Protestantism. His analyses of social and religious problems are characterized by a keenness of perception and by a depth of insight which are one obvious reason for his authority. As in the case of Rauschenbusch, an orientation to the characteristics of his writings and of his thought may prove conducive to a better understanding of his theology.

To a considerable degree, Niebuhr's thought is a reaction to the theology of the Social Gospel Movement and to the general precepts of "liberal Christianity" which follow in that tradition, which he considers shallow and overly optimistic. Quite often, therefore, his position is defined with particular reference to certain attitudes of that group, by an appeal to the doctrines of "orthodox" Christianity; thus, his identification with that trend in current American theology known as "neo-orthodoxy" (or the "new orthodoxy"), of which he is often acknowledged to be the leader. This tendency of his to regard liberal doctrines suspiciously also accounts for the apparent extremes to which he often goes to avoid having his meaning confused with those doctrines.
Another feature which recurs throughout his writings is the statement of his conclusions in the form of a paradox, or the claim that no rational solution to a problem is possible beyond its expression in a paradoxical (and therefore apparently contradictory) form. Although his position on many issues has the air of finality, Niebuhr seldom resolves a conflict or a problem in terms which are absolute. The course of action which he declares to be the solution cannot be classified as one method or another; rather, it is the maintenance of a tentative equilibrium between opposing forces. If there is any justification for calling Niebuhr's conclusions absolute, it lies only in the conviction with which he makes the declaration that the only possible solution is a paradox.

The constant repetition of a theme is also a characteristic of all of Niebuhr's writings. Within a single book, and often throughout many of his books, he will begin with a thesis and then approach it from many different angles, but always defining the original theme in its relation to the new facts and making the qualifications necessary to distinguish them. The effect of this style is that he repeats the original statement again and again, saying it in slightly different ways. In this manner, he both presents his idea clearly and develops it thoroughly.
Niebuhr's divergence from Rauschenbusch can be noted on each one of these issues, especially the last. The point where this becomes most obvious, however, is in the approach of the two men to social problems. Where-as Rauschenbusch began with the particular evil and criticized it, Niebuhr states the problem in abstract terms and then proceeds to examine the position of various important historical figures--theologians, statesmen, philosophers--in regard to this same issue. His solution to these social problems is less in terms of specific techniques than of ideals and principles which must be applied. In order to do justice to Niebuhr, however, let me hasten to add that my reading represents only a minute portion of his writings; and while this last assertion may be true for all of his books, it is certainly not true of his contributions to magazines and journals, where he very often deals with a single issue.

Throughout the rest of my investigation of Niebuhr, this same fact must be remembered—that the extent of my reading in Niebuhr is representative and significant, but hardly inclusive. My conclusions are therefore subject to revision and qualification on that count alone.

Niebuhr's theology is essentially a philosophy of history in religious terms, and I have tried to
represent this fact in my outline. However, the doctrine of sin is requisite to an understanding of so much of his thought that it deserves to be examined in considerable detail. In each case, it is important to realize that Niebuhr's thought cannot be summarized to any great extent without obscuring it somewhat; to explain what Niebuhr actually means by a certain concept would, in most instances, involve an exposition longer than his original. As in the case of Rauschenbusch, this outline of Niebuhr may not do justice to all aspects of his theology, but I hope that it will demonstrate clearly the relationship between various concepts.

II

The philosophy of history which Niebuhr presents in nearly all of his books, and which he develops most carefully in his major work, The Nature and Destiny of Man, is both profound and thorough. He examines the nature of history--its beginning, its present aspects, and its end and fulfillment--with the single purpose of discovering its meaning. Since the number of implications of such a well-developed conception is too great to mention, my analysis will be concerned primarily with the main points of that thesis which he elaborates.

A. In his view of the prophets, Niebuhr finds several ideas which are significant because of their relation
to Christian theology.

1. Prophetic religion's most fundamental relation to Christianity lies in the common conviction that history is meaningful. This belief was the basis of their faith in the God who imparts that meaning to history; and without that belief, there could have been no Christ--whose very significance lies in the claim that he is both the revelation of the meaning of history and the fulfillment of history. All other concepts in the religion of the Hebrew prophets are dependent upon this essential conviction of the meaningfulness of history.

2. Another important element in prophetic religion was the use of myth. These prophets conceived of ultimate realities in terms which were more than rational; for this reason, they could not have communicated their faith without using myths. A second characteristic of the prophets, therefore, is that their interpretation of reality depended for its transmission upon mythological symbols and forms.

3. The conception of the nature of God among the Hebrew prophets is one illustration of this fact. By this means, they were able to represent their concept of God as the creator of the universe--an idea which cannot be embraced in strictly rational terms. This basic belief about the character of God was further expanded through the various Messianic expectations to the view of God as the judge and redeemer of history as well as its creator. A significant point in this regard
is Niebuhr's interpretation: that the prophets themselves were unable to reconcile these elements of the nature of God within their religious faith; the fulfillment of the hopes of a Messiah was not possible until Christ resolved these conflicts in his own person.

4. Niebuhr examines these expectations and analyzes them on three levels. (1) "On the egoistic-nationalistic level Messianism looks forward to the triumph of the nation, empire or culture in which the Messianic hope is expressed." (p. 18) Although this is the most immature level of Messianism, the nationalistic elements which characterize it can be discovered in every form of prophetic religion. A slight refinement of this view raises it to the level which Niebuhr calls "ethical-universalistic."

The momentary triumph of evil in history is seen as a threat to the meaningfulness of history and this threat is overcome by the hope of the coming of a Messianic king who will combine power and goodness...He is a god become earthly king. (p. 19)

Here the unresolved problem is not how the aims of one's nation are to be fulfilled, but how God will overcome the temporary evil which appears to obscure history's meaningfulness.

It is only at the highest level of Messianism, however, that the prophets most accurately phrased the questions which Christ answered, although they themselves could not. The issue which could not be resolved

(1) Nature and Destiny of Man, Volume II, pp. 15-34. References are to that section.
at this level of "Prophetism" (or "Prophetic Messianism")
was neither of those which have been mentioned, but the
problem of sin. To Niebuhr, this is the central prob-
lem of Christian theology. Whereas the Hebrew prophets
who elaborated the hope of Prophetism— that God would
overcome the perennial evil in man— could not understand
the relation of God as redeemer to His nature as a judge,
Christ was able to demonstrate that relationship and
to thus/qualify significantly the Messianic expectations
on all of these levels. The importance of the prophetic
views for a comprehension of the claims of the Christian
faith should be evident.

B. Unlike Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr finds the character
of Christ far more essential to an understanding of the
Christian religion than the teachings or the ethic of
Jesus. Although elements of the latter help to make
the nature of Christ more intelligible, they are
important only insofar as they do so. I should like to
examine briefly those items of the ethic of Jesus which
relate directly to a conception of the meaning of history
before considering the relation of Christ to that same
conception.

1. The essence of that ethic itself stands in
a rather unique relation to human history. Love is
that essence— divine love; this fact raises certain
problems with which Niebuhr deals extensively. The
element of paradox enters at this point, when Niebuhr
tries to define the love ethic of Jesus as a purely
religious ideal on the one hand, and as revelant to the human situation on the other. In the first instance, this love ethic represents a relationship between man and God, not between man and man; it cannot, therefore, be made into a "practical socio-moral or even politico-moral system." 

Every human effort to do so blunts "the very penetration of his (Jesus') moral insights" and involves man in sin. Although this fact does not disqualify the love ethic of Jesus as an ethical ideal, it demands the ultimate responsibility of the individual to God as a response to God's loving will and thus places man's behavior under a standard which is so high that he cannot possibly meet its claims. Thus, "it transcends the possibilities of human life " and is incapable of being fulfilled by human beings within history. In the second instance, however, Niebuhr claims that this ethic must be made relevant to all human situations; his entire theory of social action is based upon his concept of the relevance of this ideal to history. Approximations alone are all that man can attain, in the form of equal justice in all human relations, and it is for these that men must strive.

In concluding that a tentative harmony must be maintained, Niebuhr re-iterates the demand that the ethic of Jesus be made relevant to human problems.

(2) An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, p. 48.

(3) Ibid., P. 37.
but also asserts that it finally transcends the possibilities of any human situation. This is the relation of the ethic of Jesus to history. Jesus also teaches a unique concept of the nature of God; but since he demonstrated this more clearly within his character, the concept will be considered under that last category.

2. Jesus' teachings on the end of history and on the nature of history can be understood only as he is realized to be the revelation of God within history. In his re-interpretation of the eschatology of the doctrine of the end of history, Jesus includes several qualifications of the Messianic expectations of Prophetism. Jesus taught that the fulfillment of history would occur only at that time when he should appear again. At that time, the evil which is found in every human motive and in every human situation will be overcome by divine love; God will appear as the Redeemer of history as well as its creator and judge.

As a consequence of this separation of the revelation of meaning in history in Christ and the final fulfillment of history in his second coming, Jesus regarded our human history as an "interim" between these two events. It is an interim throughout which the spirit of Christ may enter into and change men's lives; but the ideal of love cannot rule supreme until Christ has appeared again. This hope of the second coming of Christ is known in Christian theology as the "Parousia."
The character of Christ has already been suggested in the previous discussion, but still requires further consideration because of the many concepts which are involved within it.

3. Christianity enters the world with the stupendous claim that in Christ...the expectations of the ages have been fulfilled...The claim was that in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, the expected disclosure of God's sovereignty over history, and the expected establishment of that sovereignty had taken place. (4)

But, as Jesus' teachings on the subject have revealed, history has not yet been fulfilled; God's sovereignty has been revealed, but not yet established.

On the one hand, history has reached its culmination in the disclosure of the hidden sovereignty of God and the revelation of the meaning of life and history. On the other hand, history is still waiting for its culmination in the second coming of the triumphant Messiah. (5)

The meaningfulness of history, therefore, is both contained and revealed in the revelation of God in Christ.

Even beyond the disclosure of the meaning of history, Christ reveals the nature of God, the ultimate nature of divinity. According to Niebuhr, Jesus reinterpreted the hopes of Prophetism in the generally repugnant terms that God must suffer for man; the true nature of God is therefore a love which must suffer vicariously.

(5) Ibid., p. 47.
To declare, as Jesus does, that the Messiah, the representative of God, must suffer, is to make vicarious suffering the final revelation of meaning in history... It is God who suffers for man's iniquity... This is to say that the contradictions of history are not resolved in history; but they are, only ultimately resolved on the level of the eternal and the divine... (However,) God's mercy must make itself known in history, so that man in history may become fully conscious of his guilt and his redemption. (6)

Thus is the final revelation of the nature of God as the redeemer of the historical process.

Q. The purpose of Christianity, as Niebuhr defines it, is the application of the ethic of Jesus to social situations and to personal relationships: it is to recreate society so that it functions according to the ideal of equal justice—which is the nearest approximation to the love ethic of Jesus which is possible in a human society. It is the only actual possibility for human situations; and even this ideal cannot be fulfilled, because more perfect conditions can always be conceived. The tentative harmonies which are established approach the ideal, but can never fulfill it.

The fulfillment of history is partly within history, in Niebuhr's paradoxical term, because it will involve human society. Such a complete transformation of society will be required to bring it to the desired end, however, that it is not within man's power

(6) Ibid., pp. 45-6.
to achieve that fulfillment himself. It must come from the outside of history, when the triumphant Messiah shall appear and the "contradictions of history...are resolved on the level of the eternal and the divine." (7)

To define this perfectly ordered society, Niebuhr would use the same phrase that was so central to Rauschenbusch—the "Kingdom of God." Although this kingdom has partly arrived in the revelation of the sovereignty of God within history, the final establishment of the kingdom is dependent upon God's grace and power at that time which He shall choose. Niebuhr's concept of the fulfillment of history differs from that of Rauschenbusch in its much stronger emphasis upon God's prerogative. Human society is not moving gradually toward its fulfillment in the Kingdom of God, but is rather a constant struggle to achieve tentative harmonies between conflicting forces according to the ideal of equal justice for all men.

III

The fundamental problem of Christian theology, according to Niebuhr, is that of sin. This is the problem which the Hebrew prophets could not answer, because they could not understand how God overcomes the evil that taints every human good and that exists in every human situation. Christian theology must

(7) Ibid., p. 46.
make comprehensible the claim that the most significant interpretation of the life of Christ is not that he revealed God active within history, nor that he gave an answer to the question of human immortality, but that he revealed the manner in which God resolves the complex problem of human sin. This problem can be understood only as a consequence of Niebuhr's interpretation of the nature of man and of society.

A. Niebuhr expresses the nature of man as another paradox. The most obvious and unquestionable assertion is that man is finite; he is involved in the historical process and can never ultimately escape from its limitations. The second assertion of Niebuhr is that man is also a creature who partly transcends history; since he is able to view every historical situation from a perspective which enables him to judge its evils and envisage greater good, man is never entirely limited by that process. It is within and because of this dual aspect of human nature that man submits himself to sin.

Certain qualifications which Niebuhr makes of this view must be examined if the nature of man—and the concept of sin—are to be fully understood.

1. Niebuhr maintains the necessity of realizing that man's life finds its meaning only within the historical process—at least at the end of it. In other words, Christian theology cannot admit the claim that the fulfillment of human life is removed from history.
Niebuhr articulates this assertion in opposition to two particular theories which make that unfortunate claim.

Idealism finds the meaning of human life in its relation to the ultimate reality. This is the ideal of the contemplative life, through which man denies his responsibility for taking an active part in social affairs. In its extreme form of mysticism, this view finds meaning in man's life only as he communes with the essence of reality—a universal mind or an undifferentiated absolute. Niebuhr agrees with Reuschbusch in charging that such an interpretation of life does not embody the unique insights into the nature of man found within the Christian tradition.

Niebuhr, however, goes a step further in attacking the position of Romanticism as well. This view is typically expressed in the optimism of modern culture and of liberal Christianity, the belief that man can by his own efforts work out his salvation and extricate himself from the processes of history. The sense of individuality is lost even here, though; man finds that he is not self-sufficient, and that he must "seek support from something greater and more inclusive than himself." (8) Thus, he usually finds the ultimate meaning of his life in his identification with a social group, most often his nation.

(8) The Nature and Destiny of Man, Volume I, p. 87. The first five chapters of this Volume (pp. 1-150) deal with these problems.
Against both of these theories, Niebuhr defines the position of Christian theology, that the fulfillment of man's life must come within—even though at the end of—history. The two alternative views represent, to him, a type of sin in their denial of this Christian insight.

2. Man's capacity for self-consciousness and self-transcendence, which for Niebuhr is the ultimate meaning of the Biblical phrase "in the image of God," leads man into a condition within which sin is not only a possibility but an inevitability. Because at every moment of his historical existence man can envisage greater potentialities which are not being realized, he feels a sense of tension between the ideal and the actual situation. Man is also anxious about his condition because of the apparent inconsistencies and meaninglessness within history. This concept needs to be examined more carefully because it is the key to an understanding of the problem of human sin.

Anxiety is the inevitable concomitant of the paradox of freedom and finiteness in which man is involved. Anxiety is the internal precondition of sin. It is the inevitable spiritual state of man...the internal description of the state of temptation. It must not be identified with sin because there is always the ideal possibility...that faith in the ultimate security of God's love would overcome all the immediate insecurities of nature and history...It must be distinguished from sin because it is its precondition and not its actuality, and partly because it is the basis of all human creativity as well as the precondition of sin. (9)

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(9) Ibid., pp. 182-3.
Anxiety is the precondition of sin and of creativity because man, being anxious, seeks to relieve his anxiety in various ways. Without faith in God's love, his efforts lead him into sin and further into the abyss of anxiety. With this faith, his achievements are truly creative.

2. Niebuhr's analysis of the nature of society is similar in many respects to that of the nature of man. Although the first indication is that his interpretation is radically opposed to that of Rauschenbusch, the differences are primarily semantic and their views are quite similar. Five points can be mentioned which demonstrate and relate the various aspects of Niebuhr's conception.

1. Society is not organic, in any sense of the word. It is organized into many groups of varying sizes and influence which exist for different reasons and which work toward widely differing goals. The most important of these social groups is the nation, since it is the largest and most apt to command the respect, the loyalty, and the sympathy of its members. The most intimate group is, of course, the family.

2. "The relations between groups must therefore always be predominantly political rather than ethical." (10) Niebuhr believes that the foundations of society are

(10) Moral Man and Immoral Society, p. xxiii.
religious, since they depend on the "ultimate answer which is given to the ultimate question about the meaning of life." (11) These deeper values are lost, however, in the more immediate issues of economic life; and society organizes itself, on this level, along political lines. As members of society and of particular cultural groups, our relationships to and within those groups must be primarily political. This is a significant point for Niebuhr's view of social action.

3. Since the various groups which compose society have their own ideas, traditions, needs, and purposes, conflict is apt to arise not only between, but even within them. The source of this conflict is traced by Niebuhr to the existence of special privilege in society. Where such privilege exists, antagonisms are generated and these in turn give rise to hostility and conflict.

The source of conflict lies even deeper than this, however; it lies in power. Niebuhr mentions many kinds of power which create special privilege: some are due to the differentiations of social function made necessary by such a complex economy as ours; political power is another, and economic power is derivative of this which plays an important role in a highly developed industrial nation; priestly and military power are often the source of privilege, especially as the tool of an oligarchy. According to Niebuhr, these differences of power and of privilege are inevitable in any human social situation.

Conflict, therefore, is an inevitable concomitant of human society. Indeed, this is one of the theses which Niebuhr develops repeatedly. The relationships between social groups are not only political, but they are based upon the use of power and force. The limitations of social groups—which are both quantitatively and qualitatively greater than the weaknesses of individuals—"make social conflict an inevitability in human history. All social co-operation on a larger scale than the most intimate social group requires a measure of coercion." (12) This statement of his thesis portrays society not merely as a clash of interests and functions, but even as the activity of scheming, egoistic human "collectives" to improve their own positions at the expense of the social unity.

Niebuhr also examines the nature of a perfect society, and the possibility of achieving one. As he indicated in his view of the purpose of Christianity, a perfect society is not one in which all conflict is eliminated, but rather one in which conflict is held in a series of tentative equilibria approaching the ideal of equal justice. This is a goal which is even higher than the attainment of peace, because it turns men's attention both to the means which are being employed and to the ends, rather than into the ends alone.

As to the possibility of achieving such a social order, Niebuhr is much less optimistic. In unequivocal terms he says that...

differences of need or of social function make the attainment of complete equality in society impossible...(13)
There will never be a social order so perfect as to obviate the necessity of perfecting its rough justice by every achievement of social and moral good will which education and religion may be able to generate. (14)

Such is the nature of society. It is identical to the nature of man in that it, too, is finally contained within the limits of the historical process, and yet able to stand apart from history by its capacity to transcend the possibilities of every social situation.

C. In the discussion of anxiety there was indicated the element which is essential to the entire doctrine of sin: man's lack of faith in God. For Niebuhr, unbelief is the root of all sin, although it is manifested in various ways. It will be necessary to examine briefly both the cause of this unbelief and its visible effects in the many sins of which man is guilty.

1. The crux of this issue of unbelief is revealed in the doctrine of original sin. According to Niebuhr's interpretation of this doctrine, man's "will is free in the sense that man is responsible for his sin, and is not free in the sense that he can, of his own will, do nothing but evil."

(14) An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, p. 183.
(15) The Nature and Destiny of Man, Volume I, p. 244, and the rest of chapter IX.
of man, expressed in the paradox of freedom and finiteness. The cause of sin, therefore, rests in the very nature of man; man, in this predicament which embraces both the possibility of freedom and the inevitability of sin, succumbs to the unbelief of anxiety, which in turn is the precondition of that very sin which he would choose to avoid.

There are at least two general categories, however, into which other interpretations of this concept of original sin can be placed. One effect is to deny man's responsibility for sin because it is inevitable; the other is to make all human sin appear as the result of "a conscious choice of evil in defiance of a known good," (16) In opposition to the first, Christian theology must maintain the fact that man is responsible for his sin because of the ideal possibility that he can overcome his finiteness with complete faith in God. Against the other alternative, theology must elaborate the intrinsic relation of sin to human nature. Niebuhr presents this paradox as the meaning of the doctrine of original sin in Christian theology.

2. Niebuhr also elaborates as an element of the Christian doctrine of sin the concept of original justice, the loss of which is represented by the mythical conception of the Fall. It refers to perfection of the image of God within man before that is lost in the Fall, when

(16) Ibid., p. 247.
man succumbs to temptation and enters into sin. Niebuhr defines the Fall not as any particular period or event within history, but as "a symbol of an aspect of every historical moment in the life of man." (17) Man's consciousness of that original perfection occurs in the act of self-transcendence, when man realizes his own shortcomings and his own guilt. In that act, he rises to the highest reaches of his freedom. The tragedy of this matter is that although he is aware of his original perfection in that instant, he does not possess that perfection, and he consequently turns again to his sinful ways.

3. The most obvious manifestation of man's efforts to overcome his anxiety is pride; this is, then, the most common form of sin as well. It occurs in individuals and in social groups in remarkably similar forms.

Pride in the individual consists in the fact that he tries to establish his independence and to make himself the ultimate end of his own existence. He denies his dependence upon God and pretends that he can work out the solutions to all of his problems by merely applying all of his natural capacities. In essence, he denies the contingent and finite character of his existence. This pride may assume one or more of several forms:

(17) Ibid., p. 269. See also chapter X.
(a) that in which the human ego "believes itself to be 
the author of its own existence, the judge of its own 
values and the master of its own destiny" (18); 
(b) that of intellectual pride, in which man claims to 
have learned an absolute truth; (c) that of moral pride 
by which man judges himself good and others evil; 
(d) the ultimate form of spiritual pride, with which man 
denies the divinity of anything or anyone but himself 
or his own group. Dishonesty accompanies this pride, so 
that man tries to deceive himself as well as others by 
denying that he is engaged in sin. This again is 
tragedy, for it leads man even farther away from the faith 
in God by which he can find salvation; it increases his 
unbelief and his anxiety, thus involving him ever deeper 
in a vicious circle of sin and anxiety.

This same process is realized in society. A 
social group--particularly a nation--tries to deny the 
finite character of human existence and establish itself 
as the end and the fulfillment of history. This sin 
of pride on the part of a social group is familiarly 
known as tyranny; it eventually leads to the decay of 
that group or nation as its finite goals and values are 
replaced by other ones. The nation or group, by 
attempting to deny the fact of sin in its own actions, 
merely involves itself deeper in the inescapable fact 
of sin.

(18) Ibid., p. 188, and pp. 186-203.
4. The second obvious manifestation of sin in man is sensuality. Rather than trying to resolve the paradox of human existence by overdeveloping one's freedom and by denying the contingent character of that existence (the sin of Pride), man tries to escape from his freedom through his participation in the historical process.

Sensuality represents an effort to escape from the freedom and the infinite possibilities of spirit by becoming lost in the detailed processes, activities and interests of existence, an effort which results inevitably in unlimited devotion to limited values. (19)

The myriad opportunities which men have to express their sensuality need hardly be mentioned here; for the character of sin as sensuality should be familiar enough to be easily understood.

Society also manifests this type of sin in its activities when "the freedom of history is denied and men creep back to the irresponsibility of nature." (20) This is the condition of society or of a nation which is known as anarchy, caused by the denial of freedom and responsibility.

Within the preceding discussion there has been presented an extremely concise outline of the elements in Niebuhr's doctrine of sin. Almost none of the implications and qualifications of these facts have been investigated, since this task would be impossible even withing the scope of this entire project.

(19) Ibid., p. 185. See also pp. 228-240.
D. The question of how this problem of sin can be answered in satisfactory terms is also a crucial one in Niebuhr's theology. There are apparently two answers which he offers; these are subsumed under the two doctrines of grace and of salvation.

1. According to the discussion of sin as the inevitable consequence of the nature of man, Niebuhr nevertheless maintained that an ideal possibility existed by which man might escape from this cycle; through a complete dedication of his personality to the will of God. By faith in the nature of God as sacrificial love, man can attain release from the finitude of the historical process and find the fulfillment of his personality on the level of the eternal and the divine, which is also the level of the fulfillment of history. But there is evidence in Niebuhr's thought that he does not consider this a real possibility, since such a complete faith can never be embraced by a human being who is conditioned by the inexorable facts of contingent existence.

2. Grace would seem to be the only manner in which the perennial problem of sin can be solved. God is the only one who can finally transmute into goodness the evil which co-exists with every human good. This fact was first suggested in the discussion of the fulfillment of the historical process, where it was noticed that Niebuhr emphasized the prerogative of God alone to bring that fulfillment and also to establish His Kingdom. The same facts are true in the case of individuals, who
can realize all the potentialities of their lives only as God grants them His grace. Ever since the revelation of the meaning of history—of the sovereignty of God—in the person of Jesus Christ, the spirit of Christ has been with men. As this spirit dwells in them, it can restore to them an awareness of their original state of perfection. Man can never attain this perfection within the limits of his historical existence, however, until the second coming of the triumphant Christ. Thus the second coming represents the fulfillment of the individual personality as well as that of the social order. It is God's grace alone by which this establishment of His sovereignty will occur—that grace which is but one aspect of the love of God and which He grants impartially without regard to one's fitness to receive it. (Jesus used the parable of God's rain upon the just and the unjust alike to convey the meaning of this fact.)

Niebuhr asserts that the doctrine which truly expresses the nature of God in His fulfillment of history is that of the Atonement. The seriousness of history is demonstrated in the conception of the wrath and judgment of God. But since God is unwilling to destroy the distinctions between good and evil, He can resolve this paradox of sin within human goodness only by taking upon himself that evil. Thus He demonstrates His mercy and reveals Himself as the redeemer of the historical process. (21)

(21) Ibid., pp. 211, 292.
3. Such a dependence on God's grace alone quickly leads one to an attitude of determinism which is apt to threaten human responsibility. Niebuhr maintains that such a position is a betrayal of the essential insights of the Christian faith. His resolution of this paradox appears to me to be one of the weakest links in the chain of his theology.

"Only God can solve this problem (of human existence). From the human perspective, it can only be solved by faith." (22) Grace must be apprehended by faith before its full significance can be grasped by man; and it must also be apprehended in fact before it will transform his life. Niebuhr also distinguishes two aspects of God's grace; the first is the "power of God over man", which has already been described. In addition, grace is granted as the "power of God in man; it represents an accession of resources... enabling him to become what he truly ought to be." (23)

Through the elaboration of these various concepts and their implications, Niebuhr concludes his discussion of the doctrine of grace with a statement which epitomizes the problem of man and of how he is to receive this grace; the problem of grace as it now exists within man and as it will finally be revealed; and the problem of how man is to maintain his responsibility for social action when he can apparently do

(22) Ibid., p. 205.

(23) Ibid., p. 99.
nothing to change the course of history.

To understand that Christ is in us is not a possession but a hope, that perfection is not a reality but an intention; that such peace as we know in this life is never purely the peace of achievement but the serenity of being "completely known and all forgiven"; all this does not destroy moral ardour or responsibility. On the contrary, it is the only way of preventing premature completions of life...(24)

Since "such premature completions" are manifestations of sinfulness, man's only hope of escape is by faith in God's love and grace.

(24) Ibid., p. 125
Problems of Christian Social Action: a Conclusion

The essence of my entire Senior Scholar's project is contained within this last section, since this represents my first real attempt to deal with the basic issues of Christian Social Action beyond a study of the theology of the two men. It is the first opportunity which I have taken to establish relationships between the thought of these men, or to develop at all thoroughly my own conclusions on the topic which I have been studying. As such, this section will not only be incomplete, but will be subject to constant revision because of the actual restriction of my study to a core of materials. This last section is based upon the unit which was intended to be both the introduction to the original project and the basis for its conclusions. The issues which I raised there have been expanded and qualified in the outline of this present section.

I

The "Why" of Christian Social Action

A. Where arises the concern which causes individuals to express it in social action? What is the motive for taking part in Christian Social Action, and where does it originate? These questions cannot be answered here, perhaps, but an attempt to answer them must be made if the issues of social action are to be understood.
For Rauschenbusch, this source of inspiration lies primarily in a religious indignation at the evil in existing social conditions, and in a desire to improve them. I call this concern religious because both his life and his teachings seem to indicate that it is such, although he never explicitly mentions the fact. It is not a purely religious motive, however. It is fundamentally a humanitarian concern produced as a reaction against the evil in a particular social situation; this is sharpened in the individual as he comes under the influence of the Kingdom of God and as he grasps the meaning of that reality. The effect of the Kingdom of God seems to be two-fold: it enriches the person's original concern for human welfare with a deep religious motive, and it prods that concern to a point where the individual takes action to express it. From my understanding of Rauschenbusch, then, this seems to be his view of the inspiration of Christian social action: a religious faith which is produced within individuals by the interaction of the Kingdom of God with the innate social aspects of their personalities.

In Niebuhr, the source of this inspiration seems to lie at the very basis of life, in the nature of man.
The anxiety which is produced in man by the paradoxical relationship of the elements of his nature, stirs man to action in an attempt to relieve his anxiety. Unfortunately, this action does not often improve man's condition. When a man becomes inspired by the ethic of Jesus, or rather by the ideal of equal justice which it is the purpose of Christianity to attain, and when he takes action to institute that ideal in the relationships of the groups to which he belongs (and not in his personal life alone), this same inspiration may be said to be the source of Christian social action.

In the thought of both of these men there is evidence that they expect this motive -- which originates in individuals -- to find its expression through political institutions and machinery. This aspect of social action will be considered in greater detail later.

I should like to raise two questions which relate more directly to the problem of defining Christian Social Action, both of which are implied in the discussion of its inspiration or motivation. Although I may not be able to answer them, I feel that they deserve attention here and further consideration apart from this entire project. The first deals with the sponsorship of Christian Social Action as one of its sources. Such a case in point, in my personal
experience, is that of a group called the Committee on Effective Citizenship; it was organized as a subcommittee of the Student Christian Movement in New England and was recently disbanded because of an obvious lack of interest in, and enthusiasm for, the work it was doing. My question: was the original formulation of this group inspired by the religious faith (assuming this fact to be so) of a few individuals, or by the parent agency (The Student Christian Movement)? How valid is this example for all instances of Christian social action? My answer to the first question is that both facts are true; although the CEC, as it is popularly known, had the sponsorship of a large and important organization, it was the decision of a relatively small number of individuals which brought it into existence and caused its expiration. In answer to the second question, therefore, my attitude now is that this same procedure is probably true in most situations where a group organized specifically for the purpose acting according to its Christian insights into social problems: a group which is both a large and an important representative of Christian Social Action probably received its inception in the decision of a relatively few people.
The second problem is more controversial and cannot receive adequate consideration within the scope of this paper. It is the basic question of whether the motive from which social action is produced needs to be considered at all. Rauschenbusch does not deal with this problem extensively enough to take any consistent position on the issue; Niebuhr's discussion of sin should have revealed his belief that one's motive is the very basis of sin, and that different acts are merely various manifestations of the one fundamental fact of sin. For the purposes of this paper I have taken as one of my conclusions -- and also, it must be admitted, as a presupposition -- the fact that social action can be distinguished as Christian only if the motive for which it was done is recognized as being Christian. The implications of this view are so numerous and so controversial that I have found it advisable to devote an entire seminar to this issue.

E. The purpose of Christian Social Action is an extremely important question, since the answer which is given will determine to a great extent the methods which will be used to fulfill that purpose.

Rauschenbusch's concept of Christian Social Action, as I interpret it, implies as its purpose the
transformation of society into the Kingdom of God, and opposition to the Kingdom of Evil. The function of social action, therefore, is that of Christianizing society. In his own life, this purpose was translated into action designed explicitly to combat certain social problems and evils. The task of Christian Social Action, according to this view of Rauschenbusch, is to interpret the ideals embodied in the purpose of the Christian religion in terms which can be acted upon in specific social situations. I would take no exception to this statement, although Niebuhr would undoubtedly distinguish between the ultimate and impossible ideal of love in the ethic of Jesus and ideal of justice which is the one most relevant to human problems, before agreeing with Rauschenbusch.

For Niebuhr, the goal of Christian Social Action is to establish tentative harmonies among the coercive factors in society, which approximate as nearly as possible the ideal of equal justice. Conflict is not eliminated but is rather controlled at a level which provides the greatest degree of justice for all participants in the situation. This is less than a perfect society, for both the individuals and the social groups, since the ideal cannot be realized within any human environment.
A subsidiary issue is the question of whether an individual is saved in spite of, together with, or apart from the social situation and society as a whole -- both men having agreed that the transformation of society, rather than the salvation of individuals, is ultimately the purpose of Christianity. Rauschenbusch evidently feels that both of these aspects are integral parts of the process of Christianizing the social order. He maintains adamantly that an individual cannot be saved -- i.e., find the fulfillment of his personality -- within an evil environment; the complete salvation of individuals is therefore a consequent of the transformation of society into the Kingdom of God. Niebuhr's position appears to be slightly different, in that approximations of the ideal of justice in social relationships can be achieved only as individuals are inspired by the spirit of Christ to improve the existing conditions.

The issue cannot be passed off as easily as I have done, because many aspects of it have not yet been raised. My own position at this time is that the purpose of Christianity is to provide social conditions within which each individual personality can find its fulfillment in its proper relationship to God;
I think this is what Rauschenbusch meant by saying that individuals can find their salvation only in a social order which is approaching the ideal. With Niebuhr, however, I do not believe either that this process of growth toward fulfillment is inevitable or that it can be produced by human efforts alone. This last statement implies two things: that individuals must participate in the affairs of society in order to improve them, and that an entirely perfect social order can be established only by God. Like Niebuhr's conclusion, this is somewhat of a paradox -- to claim on the one hand that social action is a necessity, and on the other hand that man's capacities are so limited that he cannot by himself produce the desired result. This, to me, is the central problem of Christian Social Action and of personal ethical behavior.

C. The relation of theology to social action cannot be completely answered without considering the relationship between theology and the social environment of the theologians. The last question is perhaps a rather controversial one; for the purposes of this writing, I will assume that the theology of any historical period reflects the contemporary social situation.
From the evidence which I have examined, this seems to be the most reasonable conclusion. The obvious reasons for this are two: like most people, theologians are partly conditioned in their thought by their environment; and the theology of any given period is often an attempt to elaborate a critique of contemporary views and an apologetic for the traditional religious faith. These goals of theology -- as a critique and as an apologetic -- are quite different. The first condition is accompanied by a divergence from the religious beliefs which are accepted during a particular period; Rauschenbusch's theology can be easily placed within this category. Niebuhr is typical of a theologian whose thought falls into the second classification. Finally, it must be admitted that there will be some-what of a lag between certain conditions -- a war, for instance -- and the theology which reflects them, because of the time required for the views to be formulated and accepted.

Rauschenbusch's view of Christian social action is quite explicitly that it is a product of the social environment rather than of theology, although the latter is necessary to guide and enforce the concern which every Christian should feel about existing situations (unemployment, poverty, etc.). According
to his writings, Niebuhr would seem to take exception to this view, in that the concern for social problems should first issue from one's religious convictions, rather than from an interest in human welfare. His record as a participant in agencies of Christian Social Action shed a different light on his attitude, however; in this area, his primary concern is directly for social conditions themselves, not for the ideas which should produce that same concern in others. The actual experience of both of these men, then, substantiates the view that the actual impetus toward Christian Social Action lies primarily in the social milieu and its injustices, and secondarily in theological speculation. To say this is not to deny the fact that many persons' awareness of social responsibility originates in their religious experience. I think that the normal relationship of theology to Christian Social Action is similar to the experience of Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr: theology is to reflect, to interpret, to direct, and to constantly refresh the conviction of sensitive people that something is wrong within a social situation (or a series of them) and that something must be done to correct and improve it (or them). However, theology -- as the articulation of a religious faith -- should
always be intended to create in men the knowledge of their responsibility to the community and to society; when it forsakes this purpose, it is no longer in its proper relationship to Christian Social Action, as both of my "authorities" would agree.

One particular theological doctrine has very important implications for one's view of social action. It has been mentioned previously in the concept of grace in the summary of Niebuhr and in the discussion of the paradox of responsibility in the last section: the doctrine of grace. Too great a reliance upon the grace of God leads inevitably to a philosophy of determinism, which denies any social responsibility. The more optimistic view that man can achieve the fulfillment of his life and of the social order through his own efforts, which is generally reflected in Rauschenbusch's thought, leads just as inevitably to disillusionment and despair. The doctrine of grace must be elaborated so that it resolves the paradox of God's power and man's responsibility. The view of social action, if it is to be consistent with theology, must depend upon the elaboration of this doctrine.
The "How" of Christian Social Action

Although cases frequently occur where the theology and the purpose of Christian social action are articulated after the action has been taken, the usual order of events is the reverse. The most practical problems, those of mechanics, occur on this level.

A. As I have indicated previously, both Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr agree that social action must find its expression primarily through the existing machinery of politics and government. This is quite evident from a reading of Rauschenbusch, who refers often to a particular social issue and to the methods of taking action. His own life reveals a man who was constantly active within the community, a tireless worker for social improvements. In Niebuhr's thought this view is indicated in his belief that most human social relationships are political.

The fundamental fact here is that action is not social unless it occurs through an organized group. This means at least that an individual's own efforts to change or to correct a social situation, even when they proceed from the presuppositions of his religious faith, cannot be classified as Christian social action unless he participates in a group activity. At the most elementary level, this means that a group proceeds, on
the basis of its Christian convictions, to engage in some type of action to correct a social situation. This action is often more effective—as Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr would agree—when it is directed through some political institution or machinery.

Even when a group is organized under the sponsorship of a church or some other religious organization, its formation is apt to be the result of the decision of a comparatively few individuals, as the first section of this conclusion pointed out. The further question may be raised, whether or not Christian Social Action should be limited to groups of this type (the Methodist Federation for Social Action, the Council for Social Action of the Congregational Churches of Christ, etc.). The conclusion of Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr, and myself is that such groups are necessary in addition to action through political organizations, but that these groups are temporary and will be dispensed with if (or when) political parties, government, etc., embody the aims of Christian Social Action within their methods and purposes. Niebuhr indicates this in his activities; Rauschenbusch makes it plain in his writings when he says that "Christianity is more than the Church." (1) When men can begin to realize this fact, they can begin to develop the spirit of their Christian faith in all of their social relationships; not until that time will the purpose of their religion be seen in the process of

(1) Christianizing the Social Order, p. 153.
attainment. Only then will men be enlightened enough to see that some of the most religious acts are not church functions, nor even related to the church; many functions of the church itself are purely secular and in no way contribute to the purpose of Christianity, and many of the agencies which the church sponsors are less effective than other agencies in producing the desired results. What is really needed is religious action on the part of all men and groups who call themselves Christian.

B. Two particular problems relating to the methods and techniques of Christian Social Action need to be mentioned, even if they cannot be considered carefully.

1. Should Christian Social Action attempt to deal with the causes or the symptoms, or both aspects of social evil?

Rauschenbusch leaves no doubt in his reader's mind as to his position.

Sir Wilfred Lawson told of a test applied by the head of an insane asylum to distinguish the sane from the insane. He took them to a basin of water under a running faucet and asked them to dip out the water. The insane merely dipped and dipped. The sane turned off the faucet and dipped out the rest. (2)

Having stated this analogy, Rauschenbusch then asks a penetrating question: "Is our social order sane?". The problem which Christian Social Action must try to correct is not primarily the unfortunate situation of many individuals, but the conditions by which these

(2) Christianity and Social Crisis, p. 247.
people have been brought to their sad state. This social action should be designed less to help the present generation to find its salvation than to Christianize the social order so that following generations will not be raised under the influence of the forces of evil. Such an approach involves attacking the causes of social evil wherever they can be diagnosed and treated; the present symptoms must be treated simultaneously if the task of correcting the causes is to be successful. Niebuhr indicates a similar approach to this question of the sources of social problems, although the issues with which he deals are much more of a political nature. I think there is ample justification for the statement that Rauschenbusch usually deals with problems which have their origin in a particular situation: a strike in a certain city, or a race riot. Niebuhr approaches these problems on a more abstract level: labor relations, racial relations, academic freedom, etc. They are both finally concerned with the same task of removing both the problems and their causes.

2. The final issue is definitely a complex one, and an important one because of its implications for the techniques of social action. An answer to this question is partly dependent upon the answer given to a previous one—whether groups organized specifically for purposes of Christian Social Action are permanent or temporary.
Assuming the existence of such groups at least temporarily, is their function to participate in political programs and activities as an expression of Christian concern, or to undertake a program of education which will eventually enable those people whom it reaches to make intelligent decisions of their own?

My answer is that the second area of social action probably meets a permanent need, for as long as men are engaged in affairs of a political nature, they will need such information as will help them to make decisions as responsible Christian citizens. Groups which have been mentioned (the Methodist Federation for Social Action, for example) and many others should probably exist permanently in the capacity of educational agencies. If their work is even moderately successful, however, the need for their function as political action agencies will be reduced to a minimum and can eventually be dispensed with entirely.

Rauschenbusch's position on this question is not clear, but it is certain that he expected groups engaged in Christianizing society to be so successful that there would ultimately be no reason for their existence (in the perfect society). Niebuhr evidently considers their primary function to be that of education; but his attitude toward their permanence or their function as political agencies is not revealed in the reading I have done.
Contrary to anything I may have implied, I do not consider myself an authority on the topic of Christian Social Action. This concluding section of the project, in particular, is an incomplete attempt to articulate my own views. There are many issues involved in Christian Social Action which have, presumably, never occurred to me; many others have not been developed here for lack of both information and space. As a point of departure rather than of conclusion, however, this brief analysis will prove extremely valuable as I am able to return to the problems which are raised and implied here and to study them more thoroughly.
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