

# Theology and the Transformation of Culture – Niebuhr Revisited

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Within the context of the theme of the conference, “Christ and culture revisited”, this specific topic obviously refers to the fifth type in Niebuhr’s well-known typology.

One’s intuitive understanding may be that the question is: what is theology supposed to do in order to achieve and to facilitate the transformation of culture? One may intuitively accept that Niebuhr meant this to be the “best” possible relationship between “Christ” and “culture”, so that Christians and theologians should continuously ask themselves: what can we do, how can we go about, transforming culture? Especially in the present-day context of South African society, culture and Christianity, this option seems to suggest itself to many people: what must Christianity, the church, theology do with a view to transforming South African society and culture?

That could, however, be a grave misunderstanding of the way Niebuhr himself understood the problem. Putting his typology of social ethics, published in 1951, against the backdrop of his earlier writings and the development of his thought, will show that.

In general one can say that for Niebuhr, (*systematic*) *theology precedes ethics*.<sup>1</sup> Before asking: what must we do?, we must ask: *What is happening? What is God doing?* Only then, understanding what is going on and what God is doing, can we ask: *How must we respond?* This is a completely different way of phrasing the initial question, with important consequences.

1. Cf. James M. Gustafson’s instructive introduction to the ethical thought of Niebuhr, developing some of the themes Niebuhr discussed in his lectures but never found the time to work out and publish, in his posthumously published essays on moral philosophy, *The responsible self*, H. Richard Niebuhr (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1963) p. 6–41. Gustafson, of course, followed exactly this approach in his well-known and authoritative volumes on theocentric ethics. His indebtedness to the seminal work of Niebuhr and his affinity to many of his basic convictions are obvious in many ways. See also Lonnie D. Kliever’s well-written and extremely helpful *H. Richard Niebuhr* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1977); J. A. Insh, *The religious thought of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983); J. Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986); James W. Fowler, *To see the kingdom: The theological vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974); L. A. Hoedemaker, *The theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970); John D. Godsey, *The promise of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1970); Charles Scriven, *The transformation of culture* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1988).

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## The Story of Our Life

Niebuhr himself answers the question of how we can find out what God is doing and what is happening in his important classic *The meaning of revelation*,<sup>2</sup> published in 1941 during the war. Several of the concepts coined in this study became extremely popular and influential, and are relevant to this discussion.

In the first chapter, "The point of view", he emphasizes both our historical relativism (we are conditioned by our socio-historical situation) and our religious relativism (we can speak and think about God only from the point of view of faith in God). Because of this, Christian theology has no other option but to be "confessional", i.e. to start "by stating in simple, confessional form what has happened to us in our community, how we came to believe, how we reason about things and what we see from our point of view."

This brings him to the discussion of "The story of our life", in which he makes the important distinction between "history as seen" and "history as lived", or "external" and "internal" history.<sup>3</sup> The church has no other way of stating its faith than by telling its own story – not by appealing to nature, scripture or experience.

For understanding people's views and experiences of culture, of their own social fabric, this distinction is important, since it effects the way we experience values, time and human association.

*In internal history social memory is our own past, living in every self. When we become members of such a community of selves we adopt its past as our own and thereby are changed in our present existence.*

*In our history association means community, the participation of each living self in a common memory and common hope no less than in a common world of nature.*<sup>4</sup>

So, in order to understand any community, people in any cultural situation, "one must look with them and not at them," understand "the story of their lives", the *full story*. It is from within this collective life-story of the group that they interpret what is going on, that they believe, that they choose ultimate values, that they search for ultimate meaning, that they follow ultimate loyalties.

## The One, Sovereign and Living God, Idols and Human Sin

According to Niebuhr "the great source of evil in life is *the absolutizing of the relative*."<sup>5</sup>

One should understand this against the backdrop of his development during the twenties and early thirties, when he became deeply under the impression of *the sovereignty of God*. During the mid-thirties, this conviction intensified during his historical study of American Christianity, published in 1937 as *The kingdom of God in America*.<sup>6</sup>

In *The meaning of revelation* this conviction then becomes the heart of his argument. The One who is revealed is, in fact, not Christ but God.<sup>7</sup> The problem is that Christianity faces the continuous temptation of idolatry, of taking something relative for the living God. Normally, this means that Christian faith and the church are seen as instrumental, as necessary for serving other purposes, whether religious, cultural,

<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr H R *The meaning of revelation* (New York: Macmillan 1941)

<sup>3</sup> *ibid* p 31 66

<sup>4</sup> *ibid* p 51 53

<sup>5</sup> *ibid* (preface: the second of three fundamental convictions)

<sup>6</sup> Niebuhr H R *The kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Row 1937)

<sup>7</sup> The last chapter is entitled "The deity of God" and it argues extensively for the fact that "God reveals himself" with important consequences for Christian thinking.

ethical or political. In the nineteenth century this was the great temptation of *Kultur-protestantismus*.

Christians were tempted in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to consider themselves first of all as members of national and cultural societies rather than of the church and to turn Christian faith into an auxiliary of civilization.<sup>8</sup>

The temptation, however, is perennial.

Faith in the God of Jesus Christ is a rare thing and faith in idols tends forever to disguise itself as Christian trust.<sup>9</sup>

In *Christ and culture*<sup>10</sup> he discusses this tendency under the rubric of the "Christ and culture" position.

At its center is the tendency to interpret Christianity as a religion rather than as church, or to interpret church as religious association rather than as new society.

Many examples can be found, until today.

*Nothing* in the Christian movement is so similar to cultural Protestantism as is cultural Catholicism, nothing more akin to German Christianity than American Christianity, or *more like a church of the middle class than a worker's church*. The terms differ, but the logic is always the same: Christ is identified with what men conceive to be their finest ideals, their noblest institutions, and their best philosophy.<sup>11</sup>

The basic objection against this position, argues Niebuhr, remains:

loyalty to contemporary culture has so far qualified the loyalty to Christ that he has been abandoned in favor of an idol called by his name.<sup>12</sup>

The nature of both *sin* and *grace* is misunderstood in these forms of "self-reliant humanism" or "idolatry."

The god who is primarily a helper toward the attainment of human wishes is not the being to whom Christ said, *Thy will, not mine, be done*.<sup>13</sup>

The reason for this perennial necessity is that human beings need coherence, unity, in their life-stories, ultimate centers of value and meaning.

As a rule men are polytheists, referring now to this and now to that valued being as the source of life's meaning. Sometimes they live for Jesus's God, sometimes for country and sometimes for Yale. For the most part they make gods out of themselves or out of the work of their own hands, living for their own glory as persons and as communities.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, people make, through so many forms of "*natural faith*"<sup>15</sup>, *gods, idols, for themselves*, to satisfy this need. His conclusion is clear.

<sup>8</sup> Niebuhr *The Meaning of revelation* op cit p 24.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid* p 25.

<sup>10</sup> Niebuhr H R *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951) p 88.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid* p 102-104.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid* p 110.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid* p 113 and Niebuhr H R *The meaning of revelation* op cit p 26.

<sup>14</sup> Niebuhr H R *The meaning of revelation* *ibid* p 57.

<sup>15</sup> Niebuhr H R *Radical monotheism and Western culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960) especially *Faith in Gods and in God* p 114-126.

*To be a self is to have a god, to have a god is to have history, that is, events connected in meaningful pattern, to have one god is to have one history* God and the history of selves in community belong together in inseparable union <sup>16</sup>

For Christians, argues Niebuhr, the unity in their life-story is given in the revelation of the *personal, living, one God* in the Christ-event This means, *inter alia*, that they must reject all attempts to absolutize relative values <sup>17</sup>

These thoughts are powerfully expressed in *Radical monotheism and Western culture*,<sup>18</sup> where he contrasts henotheism and radical monotheism, and distinguishes (many forms of) "the pathology of natural faith" from "radical faith "

Henotheism is the first major pathological form of natural faith For henotheism, some social unit (such as family, nation, church, civilization or even humanity) fulfils the function of god by conveying value to and requiring service of its members

For polytheism, the second major form of pathological natural faith, value is found in many centers of concern (such as health, fame, wealth, pleasure) and loyalty is divided between these many interests

Ultimately, both fail to provide personal and social integration Polytheism is the more diffuse in its effects on personal and social existence The multiple value centers and scattered loyalties obviously fragment life

Henotheism is the more demonic It offers greater unification of self and society, arranging competing interests and conflicting duties into a hierarchy according to their ability to enhance the closed society, which functions as god Precisely this unification, however, often results in more destructiveness By absolutizing some closed society (whether ethnic, political or religious) those who are excluded from the community are treated at best as means to communal ends and at worst as threats to communal survival Henotheistic faiths have been the occasion for human history's greatest brutalities and aggressions He uses nationalism and Marxism as examples of such closed societies

Thus the "gods" of natural faith divide human beings against themselves and estrange them from their fellow creatures *Sin* is natural faith's unlimited commitment to limited goods and causes, "the failure to worship God as God" <sup>19</sup>

*Sin* always *divides* The selfish heart, clinging to relative values as if they were absolute, divides us within ourselves and from others Sometimes these values are closed societies, nations, institutions or socio-political movements that sustain the self's confidence and enlist its support for relatively long periods Sometimes the gods are particular self-interests, pleasures, or persons Whether henotheistic or polytheistic, this form of faith is always socially or internally divisive

The tragedy of our religious life is not only that it divides us within ourselves and from each other There is a greater tragedy – the twilight of the gods None of these beings on which we rely to give content and meaning to our lives is able to supply continuous meaning and value *The causes for which we live all die* <sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Niebuhr H R *The meaning of revelation op cit* p 59

<sup>17</sup> *ibid* p 63

<sup>18</sup> Niebuhr H R *Radical monotheism and western culture op cit*

<sup>19</sup> Niebuhr H R Man as sinner in *Journal of Religion* 15 July 1935 p 277

<sup>20</sup> Niebuhr H R *Radical monotheism and western culture op cit* p 121 122

Again, it follows that *self-defensiveness* is the most prevalent source of all error and evil, and religion is often used as a powerful weapon in the struggle for self-defense, a religion of idols which eventually all die.

South African racism provides an example of such *defensive and therefore divisive and destructive social ethics*, says Niebuhr:

(W)e have many illustrations in contemporary history of defensive social ethics. In the destructive interactions of castes or racial groups in the United States of America and in South Africa and elsewhere in the world we must take into account that beyond all loyalty to the law and beyond all idealism there is operative in the minds of the defensive group a deep fear of coming destruction. The future holds for it no promise, no great opportunities, but only loss and descent, if not into the grave then *ad inferos*. Its actions are those that seem to it to be fitting, i.e. to fit into a situation and into a history whose past is full of guilt, acknowledged or not, and whose future is full of death in one of its forms . . . .<sup>21</sup>

Tragically, in the face of the divisiveness and conflict, we are likely to mistake the basis of sin. Irish comments:

We are apt to believe that sin is located in particular individuals or classes which we then feel obliged to eliminate or restrain: if only we could defeat the president or control the Communists, then things would be all right . . . More serious than the arbitrary identification of sin and sinners is the superficiality of the whole analysis.<sup>22</sup>

It is from these sinful, divisive and destructive interpretations of society and culture that the revelation of the One God in Christ can liberate us.

### Interpreting History

The crucial question, of course, is *how one uses this view of revelation in actually interpreting history, concrete, present-day events, theologically*.

He explains his views in this regard with reference to Pascal's well-known dictum, when he discusses "*reasons of the heart*", and emphasizes the role of *imagination*.<sup>23</sup> Understanding-by-means-of-revelation, he says, must be seen as opposition to "*the evil imaginations of the heart*", i.e. the idolatrous interpretations we make.<sup>24</sup>

"Evil imaginations," employing images or patterns not provided by revelation, "are shown to be evil by their consequences to selves and communities." The most common example is egotism, including social egotism.

The group also thinks of itself as in the center. So all nations tend to regard themselves as chosen peoples. Defeated or victorious they only become more aware of themselves, using both pain and pleasure to fortify themselves in the conviction that all the world is centered in their destiny . . . The self lives in a real isolation in which others serve only as mirrors in which the ego is reflected . . . These imaginations . . . when they are the ultimate images of the heart lead to confusion and disaster.<sup>25</sup>

The evil consequences are clear:

But this way lies disaster . . . "communal self-exaltation is an evil imagination of the heart leading to destruction of others and the self" . . .<sup>26</sup>

21. Niebuhr, H R *The responsible self* op cit p 99

22. Irish op cit p 64-65

23. Niebuhr, H R *The meaning of revelation* op cit p 67-100

24. *Ibid* p 79-80

25. *Ibid* p 75

26. *Ibid* p 109

His criticism is sharp, even of the way we use morality in our own, idolatrous service:

We disguise our transgressions by a vast selfdeceit . . . Then we call our greed the sacred right of liberty, our covetousness liberation from slavery, our economic warfare peace, our sentimentalities love, our calousness scientific attitude, our isolation love of peace, our wars crusades.<sup>27</sup>

This, says Niebuhr, seems to be our situation apart from revelation. We have some patterns which we can employ in understanding our joys and sorrows, but for the most part they are not only inadequate, leaving us ignorant, but evil, tending to lead to destruction. There is, however, "an image neither evil nor inadequate which enables the heart to understand and the event through which that image is given them Christians call their revelation."<sup>28</sup> "Revelation . . . requires of those to whom it has come that they begin the never-ending pilgrim's progress of the reasoning Christian heart."<sup>29</sup> But how?

### **Solidarity, Suffering and Memory**

In our interpretation of history, our understanding-through-revelation of what is happening, suffering plays an important role. This is so in our interpretation of the *past*, the *present* and the *future*:

- With regard to the *past*, revelation functions in three ways. It makes our past intelligible, drives us to remember what we have forgotten, and helps us to appropriate the past history of our fellow human beings as well.

In the first place, revelation provides the pattern of dramatic unity, the image or paradigm, by means of which the reasoning imagination can unite all the disparate elements of the past into a coherent, meaningful unity.

Secondly, revelation makes it possible for Christians *to bring back to memory those sufferings which they have tried to suppress*:

By reasoning on the basis of revelation the heart not only understands what it remembers but is enabled and driven to remember what it had forgotten. When we use insufficient and evil images of the personal or social self we drop out of our consciousness or suppress those memories which do not fit in with the picture of the self we cherish. We bury our follies and our transgressions of our own law, our departures from our own ideal, in the depths of our unconsciousness. We also forget much that seems to us trivial, since it does not make sense when interpreted by means of the idolatrous image.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, we never succeed in suppressing these memories completely. They have powerful, destructive effects on our lives:

We do not destroy this past of ours; it is indestructible. We carry it with us; its record is written deep into our lives. We only refuse to acknowledge it as our true past and try to make it an alien thing – something that did not happen to our real selves. So our national histories do not recall to the consciousness of citizens the crimes and absurdities of past social conduct, as our written and unwritten autobiographies fail to mention our shame. But this unremembered past endures.<sup>31</sup>

27. *ibid* p 124

28. *ibid* p 80

29. *ibid* p 100

30. *ibid* p 83

31. *ibid*

For other people, looking at us and our groups, these effects are obvious. They see how we are determined, constrained, enslaved by these suppressed memories of our previous idolatrous thought and action:

When we live and act in accordance with our inward social constitution in which there are class and race divisions, prejudices, assumptions about the things we can and cannot do, we are constrained by the unconscious past. Our buried past is mighty, the ghosts of our fathers and of the selves that we have been haunt our days and nights though we refuse to acknowledge their presence<sup>32</sup>

This makes *confession of sin* an essential element of the very life of the Christian church:

The revelatory event resurrects this buried past. It demands and permits that we bring into the light of attention our betrayals and denials, our follies and sins. There is nothing in our lives, in our autobiographies and our social histories, that does not fit in. In the personal inner life revelation requires the heart to recall the sins of the self and to confess fully what it shuddered to remember. And every social history, not least that of the church itself, when recollected in the light of revelation, becomes a confession of sin.<sup>33</sup>

Although this confession of repressed memories of collective sin, this self-critical remembrance of the idolatrous past, is often completely absent, it must be seen as the inevitable prerequisite for a Christian church:

It is true that . . . in many spheres it has not even been started. Yet it is also true that for Christians critical history of self and community, wherein the forgotten past is recollected, is the possible and necessary consequence of revelation.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, the third function of revelation with respect to the past Niebuhr calls "appropriation". It means that in order for *solidarity* to become possible – which is imperative for people believing in the *one* God – human beings and groups must be willing to appropriate those elements of the past which seem alien to themselves, the past histories, the idolatries and sins, of their fellow human beings with whom they now want to be united in a new-found solidarity and community. *A common memory is necessary for real community.*

Where common memory is lacking, where men do not share in the same past there can be no real community, and where community is to be formed common memory must be created.<sup>35</sup>

The important point is that this whole process of interpretation, remembering and appropriating is for Christians "*a moral event*", "*a conversion of the memory*". *Remembering the suffering of the past, both caused and suffered by one's own group, and appropriating the suffering of others is the only way to real solidarity, and the only proper response to the revelation of the one, living God in Christ.*

*We are our past*, present in our conscious and unconscious memory, and therefore the heart of our own conversion is the conversion of our memories, the integration of our personal and social past in a process of social therapy.<sup>36</sup>

32. *Ibid*

33. *Ibid* p 83-84

34. *Ibid* p 84

35. *Ibid*

36. *Ibid* p 85-86

He emphasizes that this "conversion of the memory", achieving "the unity of humankind" or real solidarity, is never completed, but "*a permanent revolutionary movement*"

The conversion of the past must be continuous because the problems of reconciliation arise in every present <sup>37</sup>

He illustrates this by referring to attempts at uniting the Christian church. One of the greatest obstacles is that "every part of disunited Christendom interprets its past through an image of itself and holds fast without repentance to that image"

Moreover the groups use their separate histories as means for defending themselves against the criticism of others and as weapons for warfare upon rival parties <sup>38</sup>

In every attempt towards unity, reconciliation and solidarity it must be clear "No mere desire to overcome differences of opinion is of any avail unless it expresses itself in such reinterpretation and appropriation of what lies back of opinion – the memory" <sup>39</sup>

All of this applies even more to attempts at reconciliation in human societies and cultures

The problem of human reunion is greater than the problem of church reunion. It also must be approached through memory. *The measure of our distance from each other in our nations and groups can be taken by noting the divergence, the separateness and lack of sympathy in our social memories. Conversely the measure of our unity is the extent of our common memory* <sup>40</sup>

Again, only the Christian pattern of revelation can help to overcome the provincialisms of our separate and idolatrous historical reconstructions

- With regard to the *present*, we again need revelation in order to understand, and again suffering plays an important role

The "evil imaginations" of our hearts make it impossible for us to see *the effects of what we are doing*. "The words of Jesus on the cross, 'Father, forgive them, they know not what they do', are applicable to us in every moment" <sup>41</sup> This becomes especially important in times of social crisis, when we lose our normal confidence in our perspective on what is happening

We are particularly aware of this in times of great social crisis when our complacent dogmatism is shattered and we realize that what is going on and what we are participating in is too great for our imagination or interpretation. We have no pattern of personal thought inclusive and clear enough to allow us to discern any orderly connection between the wild and disturbed actions of men and nations. *We do not know what we are doing by our aggressions and participations, our inactions and isolations from conflict*. We move from day to day from moment to moment, and are often blown about by many winds of political and social doctrine. What the sources and what the issues of our deeds and sufferings may be remains obscure <sup>42</sup>

<sup>37</sup> *ibid* p 86 87

<sup>38</sup> *ibid* p 87

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*

<sup>40</sup> *ibid* p 88

<sup>41</sup> *ibid* p 89

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*



Niebuhr illustrates this by referring to family-life:

In our smaller communities, in our families and with our friends the same ignorance is our portion. We do not know as parents, save in fragmentary ways, what we are doing to our children. We do not understand what our most intimate friends, or our husbands and wives are doing to us and neither do they know <sup>43</sup>

In social life this lack of understanding becomes even more dangerous.

As we move about among these mists we employ imaginations of the heart to make intelligible in a narrow sphere the actions and sufferings of selves. So we interpret international events by means of the pattern of a national peace, conceiving this peace as absence of disturbance of our customary conduct, or we use the ancient image of the war between darkness and light to understand and justify our defense and aggression <sup>44</sup>

He particularly accuses the social gospel of this kind of reasoning:

In particular the social gospel has often brought to bear on societies only the impoverished image of a conflict between good and evil in which victory is not by grace but by merit, in which there is no suffering of the son of God nor forgiveness for the sinful society <sup>45</sup>

At the root of our evil imaginations, our insufficient images and patterns of interpretation, lies, again, our selfishness:

*In all this effort to understand or at least to justify our actions the self is likely to remain the central figure. We explain ourselves by ourselves or by means of the picture we have made of ourselves . . . But with the aid of such patterns we succeed more in obscuring than in illuminating what we are doing* <sup>46</sup>

- With regard to the *future*, revelation again provides the pattern of understanding for the reasoning heart or the reasoning imagination and again suffering comes into the picture. We discover that our egotistic attempts at safeguarding and securing our own future, will lead to suffering, destruction – for ourselves and others – and death, in spite of the promises of false prophets:

(T)he revelation which illuminates our sin prophesies our death, the death of self and that of the community. The small, deceitful patterns of false prophecy will always assure us that we and our communities are immortal, that the worth of ourselves is so great that they cannot die and the value of our chosen peoples so immense that they will last forever <sup>47</sup>

Therefore, all reasoning of the heart with the aid of revelation is painful and none more so than that which leads to knowledge of the self.<sup>48</sup>

What then is the proper image, the pattern, provided by the revelation in Christ? Of special importance is the way in which *the cross* of Jesus Christ became the basic paradigm for Niebuhr with which to interpret and to respond to suffering.

There are some interesting examples available from Niebuhr's own work of the

43. *Ibid* p 89-90

44. *Ibid* p 90

45. *Ibid* p 88

46. *Ibid* p 90

47. *Ibid* p 95

48. *Ibid* p 96

application of this method in interpreting events. Of special interest is the way he interprets (the) *war* in a number of articles,<sup>49</sup> but it is impossible to deal with it here. The important aspect is that he keeps asking what *God* is doing in the war, in order to try to ascertain the proper response.

## Responding to What God is Doing

By now it is obvious why *responsibility* became the single term by which Niebuhr could describe the proper moral conduct of Christians.<sup>50</sup> They must *respond to the living God*, revealing Godself in history according to the pattern of Jesus Christ. According to his famous motto: "God is acting in all actions upon you so respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action."<sup>51</sup>

Some distinctions can clarify the implications. Niebuhr often, especially in later years, used the now well-known distinction between human beings as *answerers*, *makers* and *citizens*. The two basic forms of Christian moral thinking, he argues, namely *teleology* and *deontology*, see human beings as makers and citizens respectively.

*Teleological* theories of ethics interpret the moral life in terms of the *goals* of human behaviour and the *consequences* of human choice. Morality is fundamentally a matter of purposive shaping of life toward future and final goals. The *image*, root metaphor, or symbolic form, underlying these theories is that of *craftmanship*. Society is seen as a tool or a toy. According to Niebuhr, they cannot adequately account for guilt, tragedy and character in moral life.

*Deontological* theories of ethics interpret the moral life in terms of *timeless rules and strict compliance*. Morality is fundamentally a matter of principled obedience or legal conformity. The *image*, root metaphor, or symbolic form, underlying these theories is that of *citizenship*. Society is seen as a sphere of making and obeying laws. According to Niebuhr, they do not appreciate ambiguities and history's novelties either, and cannot accommodate anxiety, freedom and change in the moral life.<sup>52</sup>

Acknowledging the value of these theories, Niebuhr wants to complement them with a theory of moral *responsibility*, using the image or root metaphor of "*human-beings-as-answerers*". He sees moral action as more a matter of situational response to challenges than as pursuing ideals or adhering to laws:

If we use value terms then the differences among the three approaches may be indicated by the terms, the *good*, the *right*, and the *fitting*; for teleology is always concerned with the highest good to which it subordinates the right; consistent deontology is concerned with the right, no matter what may happen to our goods; but for the ethics of responsibility the *fitting* action, the one that fits into a total interaction as response and as anticipation of further response, is alone conducive to the good and alone is right.<sup>53</sup>

49. Niebuhr, H R "War as the judgment of God", *Christian Century* 59, 13 May 1942, p 632-633, "Is God in the war?", *Christian Century* 59, 5 August 1942, p 953-955, "War as crucifixion", *Christian Century* 60, 28 April 1943, p 513-515, "A Christian interpretation of war", an unpublished essay in the possession of J Gustafson

50. Already in "The responsibility of the church for society" in *The gospel, the church and the world*, K S Latourette (ed.) (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946) p 111-133, but more fully developed in *Christ and culture* and especially in the posthumous *The Responsible self*. Cf the introduction by Gustafson in *The Responsible self*

51. Niebuhr, H R *The Responsible self* op cit p 126, "Monotheistic idealism says 'Remember God's plan for your life' Monistic deontology commands 'Obey God's law in all your obedience to finite rules' Responsibility affirms 'God is acting in all actions upon you' So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action '"

52. *Ibid* p 471

53. *Ibid* p 60-61

His rather formal definition of responsibility includes four basic elements, namely response, interpretation, accountability and social solidarity.

He now draws on his previous, theological, distinctions, e.g. 'between polytheism, henotheism and monotheism, or natural and radical faith, to show that *all moralities divide over their understanding and implicit response to the ultimate context* within which all things and persons, activities and relationships have their being and value. Now the importance of theology for ethics, of revelation for the interpretation of history, of distinguishing God from the idols, absolute from relative, becomes finally clear. Now the importance of understanding "*the full story*" is obvious.

All forms of natural faith respond to the final context in suspicion and hostility, while radical faith responds in trust and loyalty. Natural faith leads to *defensive* forms of responsibility and ethics, giving loyalty to relative centers of value, responding "fittingly" to partial interpretations of reality and within provincial communities of solidarity, finally resulting in distrust, fear, division and destruction. Niebuhr calls this a *fight or flight*-responsiveness, revealing a deep distrust and antagonism towards life's ultimate context and final meaning. It leads to an *ethics of death*, expressed on personal level in self-preservation and socially in the closed society. The ethics of death, like the gods of natural religion, are in the end divisive of life and defenseless against death.<sup>54</sup>

Radical faith leads to *faithful* forms of responsibility and ethics, responding "fittingly" to total interpretations of reality and within a universal community of solidarity, resulting in trust, an ethics of life, replacing self-preservation with self-giving and the closed society with an open society. Only a radical conversion to *monotheistic faith* can, however, accomplish this.

But to whom do we respond in monotheistic faith? Here Niebuhr's use of the distinction between God as Creator, God as Judge (Governor) and God as Redeemer plays its role.<sup>55</sup> He builds an *ethics of world-affirmation* on the action of God as Creator, an *ethics of limitation* in response to God's governance of the world, and an *ethics of renewal* in response to God's actions as Redeemer. It is within the context of the third that his views on transformation must be located.

### Transformation as Concrete Conversion

Already in 1937 in *The kingdom of God in America* Niebuhr spelt out his conviction that the vision of God's kingdom, at the heart of Christian faith and of Protestantism, and attempted as a great experiment in America, implied that the reformation of church and society is the continuing imperative of the Christian faith.

In the preface of *The meaning of revelation* Niebuhr states as the third of his fundamental convictions that "Christianity is 'permanent revolution' or *metanoia*." And at the end of his career, in a contribution to the "How my mind has changed" series, he writes on "Reformation, continuing imperative".<sup>56</sup>

Through the years Niebuhr used many synonymous expressions: change of mind, repentance, conversion, redemption, republication, reinterpretation, revolution,

54. Kliever *op cit* p 126

55. Cf. Gustavson p 25-41, Kliever p 137-144, Insh p 57-78, *The meaning of revelation* p 101-141, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*

56. Niebuhr, H R *Christian Century* 77, 2 March 1960, p 248-251 Cf. also "Ex libris", *Christian Century* 78, 13 June 1961, his list of the ten books that did the most to shape his thought, and H Frei on Niebuhr's theological background in *Faith and ethics*, P Ramsey (ed.) (New York: Harper & Row, 1957) p 9-64

reconstruction, restoration, reorganization, metamorphosis, transformation, transvaluation, transfiguration.<sup>57</sup> It is *this* conviction that underlies the fifth type in *Christ and culture* which he calls *conversionism*.

Firstly, it is important to see that "transformation" does not, at least not in the first place, refer to something active on the part of Christians, but instead to a response on their side, a response of radical, revolutionary *conversion*, a response to what the living God is doing. That is why one must call it "concrete *conversion*."

Secondly, it is important to see that this "revolutionary faith" or "*conversion*" meant, for Niebuhr, responding to what God is doing in *particular situations, in very concrete, and ever-changing, socio-historical situations*. That is why one must call it "concrete (or contextual) conversion."

The conversion, the proper transformation of self, church and society, does not take place in terms of timeless, abstract and never-changing principles, ideas or slogans, but in terms of the concrete and very particular life-situations, the historical contexts, and what the sovereign God, known in Jesus Christ, is doing there and then.

This, of course, makes a *theological* analysis of the situation or historical context a prerequisite for moral response.

For this reason he was always very much aware of the context, both of time and place, in which he and others practised theology. His first book to be published was the epoch-making *The social sources of denominationalism* (1929), a sociological analysis of the American churches. With that approach he introduced a new kind of situational theology, with the help of social analysis, which was to have a major influence in American theology in the twentieth century. Personally he was not satisfied with a sociological interpretation only, so that *The kingdom of God in America* (1937) followed as a sequel to his first book, precisely to complement the sociological interpretation with a theological one, but his appreciation of social analysis and historical awareness characterized all his work afterwards. Even when using his well-known method of "typologies" or "ideal-types" in order to classify and understand main trends, he showed his extraordinary sensitivity to the socio-historical contexts of the theologians and movements he discussed as illustrations. In *Christ and culture* that is obvious as well. He never simply looked at ideas, principles or motifs, but also discussed theologians as concrete, living people, within particular historical contexts and movements. In 1932, he furthermore introduced Tillich to English readers by translating his well-known *The religious situation*.

This also makes it clear *why the proper response expected of the church differs so fundamentally in different publications* of Niebuhr. One can distinguish a number of different and even contradictory views of the role of the church in society which he defended in different socio-historical periods.

- In some of his earliest writings, he pleads for an attitude of *withdrawal* from the world on the part of the church, as an antidote to "this-worldliness" in Christianity, appealing *inter alia* to Benedict<sup>58</sup>, whom he would, during 1941, discuss under the first type of his typology, that of Christ-against-culture.

57. Tucker, R.F., *H. Richard Niebuhr and the ethics of responsibility* (Ph D. diss. Drew University, 1970) p 164, quoted by Kliever, p 144 and p 200, note p 27.

58. Niebuhr, H.R. "Back to Benedict?" *Christian Century* 42, July 1925, p 860-861.

In a book published as late as 1935, *The church against the world* (co-authored with W Pauck and F Miller), he still strongly criticizes the church's uncritical alliances with capitalism, nationalism and humanism and counsels a strategic withdrawal of the church from the world, especially in a chapter called "Toward the independence of the church."<sup>59</sup>

In a variety of articles<sup>60</sup>, as well as in *Radical monotheism and Western culture*, finally published in 1960 but with parts written as early as 1943, he again attacks many of these idolatrous alliances. The well-known Sydney E Ahlstrom calls this book "an austere prophetic judgment of many contemporary idolatries."

• In *The social sources of denominationalism*, Niebuhr analyses the class, ethnic, regional and racial origins of denominations and points to the *irresponsibility of the divided church*. This is a theme which reappears, for example, in an article on "The hidden church and the churches in sight"<sup>61</sup>, where the particular religious organizations called churches are called to continuous conversion in the light of the "emergent reality" of the true church.

The burden of Niebuhr's ethical concern around 1929 was *how to reform and unify the churches* in order that they might play their proper role in culture. Denominations, he argues, are the results of complex determinants like economic standing, class status, educational achievement, sectional history and nationalistic identity. He offers prophetic criticism of "the ethical failure of the divided church", seeing at the foundation of it all pluralism of values and *self-defensiveness*, causing moral paralysis and cultural disintegration.

Even in his later years, noting with gratitude those theologians, including his brother, who were devoted to the reformation of culture, he numbers himself among those particularly concerned with the reformation of the church itself, ultimately, to be sure, in the service of society, since "the times call for the aggressive love and dramatic example of a responsible society".<sup>62</sup>

(T)he church can only lead in the social act of repentance and transformation by setting its own house in order. When social customs, economic policies, political views, property holdings and personal relationships are seen to contradict radical responsibility, the responsible church sets the pace for their reformation in society by changing them within its own life . . . (T)he church meets its social responsibility when in its own thinking, organization and action it functions as a world society, undivided by race, class and international interests.' Niebuhr sees this radical demonstration of faith as the highest form of social responsibility in the church.<sup>63</sup>

• During the very early twenties and even the early thirties, however, in analyzing American Protestantism, Niebuhr also seems to favour some elements of the vision of the social gospel.

Before 1922 he wrote two articles describing the church's moral obligations towards society in terms of the social gospel, summoning the church to embody the

59. Niebuhr, H R *The church against the world*, with W Pauck and F P Miller (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Co., 1935) p 123-156

60. Niebuhr H R E g "The irreligion of communist and capitalist", *Christian Century* 47, 29 October 1930, p 1306-1307, "The Christian church in the world's crisis", *Christianity and society* 6, Summer 1941, p 11-17

61. Niebuhr, H R in *Religion in Life* 15, Winter 1945-1946, p 106-116

62. From 1954 to 1956 he led a team studying theological education in the USA and Canada for the American Association of Theological Schools. For the results see *The ministry in historical perspective* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956) ed with D D Williams, and *The advancement of theological education*, 1957, with Williams and Gustafson. Finally, he wrote the important *The purpose of the church and its ministry* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956)

63. Kliever *op cit* p 160

Sermon on the Mount by way of joining and ameliorating the labour movement's struggle for economic and social justice.<sup>64</sup>

Later, however, he would discuss the social gospel as a Christ-of-culture type in his typology and criticize it strongly.

- In the meanwhile, during the early years of the war, he was so deeply impressed by the suffering and the sense of international crisis, that he laid still other emphases. In 1932, analyzing the conflict between China and Japan, he advocated "the grace of doing nothing"<sup>65</sup>. This his brother Reinhold opposed in a public polemic ("Must we really do nothing?"), and Niebuhr answered him by affirming "the meaningful inactivity of repentance and forgiveness while God is working out his judging and redeeming way in this great tragedy."<sup>66</sup> Later he could interpret the war in no other way than as "crucifixion", to be endured and suffered.

Kliever argues that these calls for separation and inaction were acknowledgements of human imperfection. For Niebuhr it was the inevitable consequence of the powerful personal conversion he was undergoing at the time under the influence of the theologians of the sovereignty of God. His new sense of the sovereignty of God and the sinfulness of humans led him to stress the discontinuities between divine grace and human efforts. His reasons were therefore theological and deeply personal, although, remarks Kliever, also "strategic rather than programmatic."<sup>67</sup>

- The more positive motif of *transformation* really starts to develop in his preparation for *The kingdom of God in America*. It comes to fruition in *The meaning of revelation* (1941), called by Kliever "a timely manifesto for the continuing reformation of religion and society"<sup>68</sup>, and, of course, in *Christ and culture* (1951). It is his fifth type, which he *seems* to favour, although much more subtly than is normally recognized.

- After the war, in the new historical context of reconstruction, it became possible for him to interpret the task of the church in terms of the logic and paradigm of "resurrection", advocating strong attacks on world injustices. This was because now the times called, not for strategic withdrawal, but for active participation in healing the wounds of people and nations, for *assuming responsibility*.

A few years after the war, in more peaceful and optimistic times, Niebuhr wrote his typology. It is therefore necessary to read this carefully. One can indeed conclude that he favours the fifth position, that of "transformation", but then one should see that he in fact argues for the legitimacy of all five types, in different socio-historical situations, and even at the same period in time, for they complement one another, and one without the criticism of the other would be a mistake.

In addition, one must recognize that he prefers to call the fifth position, not "transformation", but *conversionism*, accentuating the fact that it is the church itself, Christianity itself, theology itself, which must be transformed, converted, changed, in response to what the sovereign God is doing under differing circumstances.

64. "The alliance between labor and religion", *Magazin für Evangelische Theologie und Kirche* 49 (1921) p 197ff. "Christianity and the social problem", *Magazin für Evangelische Theologie und Kirche* 50, 1922, p 278ff. Cf. also "Faith, works and social salvation", *Religion in Life* 1, 1932, p 426-430, "Nationalism, socialism and Christianity", *World Tomorrow* 16, 1933, p 469-470, "Toward the emancipation of the church", *Christendom* 1, 1935, p 135-145, "The attack upon the social gospel", *Religion in Life* 5, 1936, p 176-181. "The Christian evangel and social culture", *Religion in Life* 8, 1939, p 44-48. According to Kliever all these articles show his "practical concerns" of the time, Kliever p22

65. Niebuhr H R in *Christian Century* 49, 23 March 1932 p 378-380

66. Niebuhr, H R "The only way to the kingdom of God" *Christian Century* 49 1932 p 447

67. Kliever *op cit* p 51-52

68. *ibid* p 23

These examples must suffice to demonstrate the importance of the *context*, the *situation*, the Niebuhr, making theology always particular, *kairotic*, more than has often been realized and admitted by theologians claiming to work with universals and timeless truths. It is not possible to use Niebuhr to defend the proper task of the church in society and culture. Without a doubt, this strong sense of *historical and cultural relativity* was the result of the lasting influence of Troeltsch on Niebuhr's thought.<sup>69</sup>

Responsibility, says Niebuhr, is exercised *in society*<sup>70</sup> and in *time and history*.<sup>71</sup>

At the same time, one must heed Niebuhr's *warnings* in this regard against "*many old and new temptations*" arising from these new insights in the crucial role of "the particular point of view":

On the one hand, says Niebuhr, "a sceptical historical relativism today proclaims the unreliability of all thought conditioned by historical and social background."

On the other hand, says Niebuhr, the way out of this difficulty is not to claim ultimate and divine revelatory authority for the experiences of a particular group in society, or for a particular context and contextual theology either. He rejects the way in which "national, racial and ecclesiastical relativism proclaims that only the thought and experience of a particular historical group is true and dependable", calling that *social solipsism*.

The way to escape these "dangers confronting thought", i.e. both "scepticism" and "egoistic totalitarianism", emphasizes Niebuhr, is not "to avoid the problem by damning historical relativism itself as an aberration". There is no turning back to fundamentalism and authoritarianism, but only the way of "*a critical historical theology*."

In his view such a critical historical theology must be aware of its own contextuality, its socio-historical and cultural relativity, and the particularity of its concepts and language. Nevertheless it must also be willing to be a *confessional theology*, and not fall into scepticism.

On the other hand its willingness to confess must not lead to egotistic totalitarianism or to social solipsism. This temptation can be overcome by the willingness to listen. The critical historical theology must therefore also be *church-theology*, *ecumenical theology*, willing to listen to the fathers and the mothers, the sisters and the brothers. Listening to the others can become "a moral experience", an "occasion for active repentance."

For Niebuhr, therefore, in our interpretation of what is going on in society and culture, in our reading of revelation in history, in our interpretation of God's actions in events and movements and in our decisions as to what is responsible praxis within our situation, we must realize our relativity and limitations. That should not make us afraid of confessing and acting, instead, it should encourage us to listen to others, especially to those "on the underside of history", those suffering under a cross, and we should be willing to be converted in a fundamental and radical way.<sup>72</sup>

69. For the influence of Troeltsch, on whom he wrote his doctoral dissertation at Yale, see Kliever p 29-36, p 46-47

70. Niebuhr H R The responsible self *op cit* p 69-89

71. *Ibid* p 90-107

72. In the original presentation, an agenda of issues to be discussed was suggested and briefly developed at this stage

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