MEANING, MYSTERY, METHOD, AND MYSTAGOGY ACCORDING TO REINHOLD NIEBUHR

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A B S T R A C T

This study is about Reinhold Niebuhr's notions of meaning, mystery, method, and mystagogy. Niebuhr's understanding of myth is the binding thread through these notions, and it is to be found in issues dealing not only with protology (the idea of creation and the biblical accounts of the 'beginnings'), but also with eschatology (the biblical idea of the ends of time and history) and the relevance of this idea for Christian faith today.

The first chapter highlights Niebuhr's basic premise regarding meaning, namely the conviction that mystery does not obstruct, but augments, the meaning of life, history, and human existence. The second chapter deals with the notion of God as mystery and symbol, and with Niebuhr's emphasis on the close correspondence, indeed profound unity, between ultimate meaning and ultimate mystery. The analysis of the text "Incoherence, Coherence, and the Christian Faith" in the last section of this chapter aims at deepening the relation between partial fulfillments, incomplete meanings, and the problem of truth as presented at the end of chapter one, thus paving the way for considerations concerning method. This is the issue of chapter three. After a critical examination of various attempts to characterize Niebuhr either as a liberal, a neo-orthodox, a dialectical, or a biblical thinker, emphasis is put on Christian Realism as the guiding principle in Niebuhr's thought and action as a Social Gospel theologian both belonging to, and critical of, the Social Gospel movement. Niebuhr's Christian Realism, though, does not provide the final answer to the question pertaining to the center of his theological method.

Niebuhr's preaching, writing, and teaching activities from the times of his appointment as pastor in Detroit up to his work at Union Theological Seminary in New York can all be summed up in the term 'mystagogy'. This approach is characterized and developed in chapter four. Niebuhr became increasingly involved in political movements of his day and concerned with what is commonly called the secularism of today's culture, which helped him to better situate Christian faith both as individual and social orientation toward what he called the Hidden Christ. This is similar to Karl Rahner's thought from the 1950s on which finds its inspiration in the notion of Anonymous Christianity. In this way, this study is an attempt to further develop Langdon Gilkey's comparison between Niebuhr and Rahner. By relying on past Niebuhrian research this study aims at gaining insights into some challenges for the future of both Christian faith and culture.

R É S U M É

Cette thèse doctorale porte sur les notions de sens, de mystère, de méthode et de mystagogie telles que comprises et développées dans l'œuvre de Reinhold Niebuhr. Elle montre dans quelle mesure la compréhension originale du mythe chez Niebuhr constitue la toile de fond de ces notions et se retrouve dans les questions concernant autant la protologie (l'idée de création et les récits bibliques des 'commencements') que l'eschatologie (l'idée biblique de la fin des temps et de l'histoire) et l'importance de cette idée pour la foi chrétienne aujourd'hui.

Le premier chapitre illustre l'option fondamentale de Niebuhr concernant le sens, notamment la conviction que le mystère n'obscurcit pas, mais au contraire augmente le sens de la vie, de l'histoire et de l'existence humaine. Le deuxième chapitre traite de Dieu en tant que mystère et symbole ainsi que de l'insistance de Niebuhr sur l'étroite corrélation, voire la profonde unité, entre le sens ultime et le mystère ultime. Dans la dernière section de ce chapitre, l'analyse du texte concernant les thèmes de l'incohérence et de la cohérence en rapport avec la foi chrétienne selon Niebuhr vise un approfondissement des rapports entre accomplissements partiels, sens incomplets, et la question de la vérité tels qu'abordés à la fin du premier chapitre, et prépare ainsi les considérations concernant la méthode, objet même du chapitre trois. Après l'examen critique de diverses manières de situer Niebuhr comme penseur libéral, néo-orthodoxe, dialectique, ou encore biblique, l'accent est mis sur le Réalisme Critique en tant que principe de base de la pensée et de l'action de Niebuhr en tant que théologien qui, à la fois, appartient au mouvement dit du Social Gospel et critique ce mouvement. Toutefois, le Réalisme Critique de Niebuhr ne peut constituer une réponse définitive à la question du centre même de sa méthode théologique.

Les activités de Niebuhr en tant que prédicateur, écrivain et enseignant, depuis le temps de son pastorat à Détroit jusqu'à ses tâches au Union Theological Seminary de New York, peuvent toutes se rapporter à ce qu'on peut appeler la mystagogie. Cette suggestion est décrite et développée au chapitre quatre. Niebuhr s'impliqua de plus en plus dans les mouvements politiques de son époque, et il devint ainsi réellement préoccupé par ce qu'on appelle habituellement le sécularisme de la culture présente. Cela le conduisit à situer la foi chrétienne, aux plans à la fois personnel et communautaire, par le moyen de ce qu'il appelle le Christ Caché. Cette orientation comporte de nombreuses affinités avec la pensée de Karl Rahner : depuis les années 50, celle-ci trouve son inspiration dans la notion de Christianisme Anonyme. De cette manière, cette thèse doctorale est une tentative de développer plus avant la comparaison entre Niebuhr et Rahner tentée naguère par Langdon Gilkey. Prolongeant ainsi la recherche sur Niebuhr, cette thèse doctorale cherche à préciser certains défis concernant l'avenir autant de la culture que de la foi chrétienne.

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Contents

Abbreviations
for works by
Reinhold Niebuhr [N], Karl Rahner [R],
and others [2.1/2.2/3] *

Ach	[N]	Essays in Applied Christianity, 1959
ApEm	[2.2]	Bacik, Apologetics & the Eclipse of Mystery, 1980
bdy2		journal boundary 2
BeT	[N]	Beyond Tragedy, 1937
BuEA	[3]	Macquarrie, Bultmann's Exist. Approach to Theol., 1957
BW		journal The Biblical World
CaC		journal Christianity and Crisis
CaCR	[2.2]	Marmion, The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner, 2005
CC	[R]	Christian at the Crossroad, 1975
CCen		journal The Christian Century
CeA	[2.1]	Gaudin & Hall, Niebuhr – A Centenary Appraisal, 1994
CFMW	[N]	Christian Faith in Modern World, 1930
ChF	[2.1]	Harland, Christian Faith & Society, 1988
ChR	[2.1]	Lovin, Niebuhr & Christian Realism, 1995
ChSo		journal Christianity and Society
ChSR	[2.1]	Lewis, Christianity & Social Revolution, l935
CI	[N]	Coherence, Incoherence & Christian Faith, 1951
CJT		Canadian Journal of Theology
CKR	[2.2]	… see above CaCR
CLCD	[N]	Children of Light, Children of Darkness, 1944
Co	[3]	Augustine, Confessions
CoPT	[N]	Contribution of Tillich, 1937
CRLT	[2.1]	McCann, Christian Realism & Liberation Theology, 1981
CRN	[2.1]	Bennett, Contribution of Niebuhr, 1937
CRPP	[N]	Christian Realism & Political Problems, 1953
CWM	[3]	Ogden, Christ Without Myth, 1961
DCNR	[N]	Does Civilization Need Religion?, 1927
DST	[N]	Discerning the Signs of the Times, 1946
FaH	[N]	Faith & History, 1949
FaHS	[2.2]	Metz, Faith in History & Society, 1980
FCF	[R]	Foundations of Christian Faith, 1978
FP	[N]	Faith & Politics, 1968
FSM	[N]	Faith as a Sense of Meaning, 1966
FWS	[R]	Faith in a Wintry Season, 1990
GF	[R]	Grace in Freedom, 1969
GiT	[3]	Gilkey, Gilkey on Tillich, 1990

* See bibliography. – Other abbreviations are indicated in Siegfried M. Schwertner, *International Glossary of Abbreviations for Theology and Related Subjects*. Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1992.

GSM	[2.2]	Kelley, The Graced Search for Meaning, 1992
HiE	[3]	Bultmann, History & Eschatology, 1957
HuD	[2.1]	Lehmann & al., Human Destiny, 1943
HW	[R]	Hearers of the Word, 1969 – German original 1941
IAH	[N]	Irony of American History, 1952
InCE	[N]	Interpretation of Christian Ethics, 1935
InG	[R]	Incomprehensibility of God, 1978
IPR	[3]	Dorrien, Imagining Progressive Religion, 2001
JeM	[3]	Bultmann, Jesus Christ & Mythology, 1958
JES		Journal of Ecumenical Studies
JoEv	[3]	Augustine, In Iohannis evangelium tractatus
JR		Journal of Religion
JRE		Journal of Religious Ethics
JRelSt		Journal of Religious Studies
KeB	[2.1]	Kegley & Bretall, Soc., Pol. & Theol. Thought, 1956
KeM	[3]	Bultmann, Kerygma & Myth, 1964
KiG	[3]	H.R. Niebuhr, Kingdom of God in America, 1937
KRD	[R]	Karl Rahner in Dialogue, 1986
LNTC	[N]	Leaves – Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, 1929
LoJ	[N]	Love & Justice. Ed. Robertson, 1957
LRN	[2.1]	Scott, The Legacy of Niebuhr, 1975
MaHE	[3]	Gilkey, Maker of Heaven & Earth, 1965
MaNC	[N]	Man's Nature & His Communities, 1965
MaO	[N]	Mission and Opportunity, 1971
MePL	[R]	Meditation on Priesterly Life, 1973
Mess		journal The Messenger
MLT	[3]	Dorrien, Making of Am. Liberal Theology, 2003
MMC	[N]	Fey, How My Mind Has Changed, 1960
MMIS	[N]	Moral Man & Immoral Society, 1932
MoR	[3]	H.R. Niebuhr, Meaning of Revelation, 1941
ND1	[N]	Nature & Destiny of Man, vol. 1, 1941
ND2	[N]	Nature & Destiny of Man, vol. 2, 1943
NewR		journal The New Republic
NHA	[2.1]	Brown, Niebuhr & His Age, 1966
NPl	[N]	Note on Pluralism, 1958
NTH	[2.1]	Gilkey, Niebuhr's Theology of History, 1975
NTM	[3]	… see above KeM
NW	[3]	Gilkey, Naming the Whirlwind, 1969
ON	[2.1]	Gilkey, On Niebuhr, 2001
PM	[R]	… see above MePL
PoD	[3]	Grobel, Practice of Demythologizing, 1959
PrC	[3]	Bultmann, Primitive Christianity, 1956
PRN	[2.1]	Stone, Prof. R. Niebuhr, 1992
PtP	[2.1]	Stone, Prophet to Politicians, 1972
PVT	[2.1]	Landon, Niebuhr – Prophetic Voice in Our Time, 1962

RaC	[2.1]	Leibrecht, Religion & Culture, 1959
RadRel		journal Radical Religion
RelLife		journal Religion in Life
ReLR	[2.1]	Wiemen, Religious Liberals Reply, 1947
REnE	[N]	Reflections on the End of an Era, 1934
ReNS	[2.1]	Scott, R. Niebuhr, 1963
ReP	[N]	Religion & Poetry, 1930
ReR	[2.1]	U. Niebuhr, ed., Remembering R. Niebuhr, 1991
Retr	[3]	Augustin, Retractationes
RN	[2.1]	Durkin, R. Niebuhr, 1989
RNA	[2.1]	Bloesch, R. Niebuhr's Apologetics, 2002
RNB	[2.1]	Fox, Niebuhr's Biography, 1985
RNP	[N]	R. Niebuhr on Politics. Eds Davis & Good, 1961
RS	[3]	… see below TRS
RSF	[3]	Gilkey, Religion & Scientific Future, 1970
SDT	[3]	Bultmann, Significance of Dial. Theology, 1969
SeDH	[N]	The Self & The Dramas of History, 1955
SiS	[3]	Dorrien, Soul in Society, 1995
SLJT		St. Luke's Journal of Theology
SoG	[3]	White & Hopkins, Social Gospel, 1976
SpW	[R]	Spirit in the World, 1968
STH	[2.1]	Nishitani, Significance of Theol. of Hist. for Christian Soc. Ethics, 1999
SyT	[3]	Tillich, Systematic Theology
ThNT	[3]	Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, 1951, 1955
ThPL	[2.1]	Rasmussen, Niebuhr – Theologian of Public Life, 1991
ThTo		journal Theology Today
TI	[R]	Theological Investigations, 23 vol., 1961-1983
TiM	[N]	Truth in Myths, 1937
TJT		Toronto Journal of Theology
TRB	[3]	Malet, Thought of R. Bultmann, 1961
TRN	[2.1]	Harland, Thought of R. Niebuhr, 1960
TRS	[N]	The Religious Situation. Ed. D. Cutler, 1968
TS		journal Theological Studies
USQR		journal The Union Seminary Quarterly Review
WDT	[3]	Tillich, What Is Wrong with Dialectical Theology?, 1935
WHF	[2.1]	Kleinman, World of Hope, World of Fear, 2000
WRHP	[N]	Rauschenbusch in Hist. Perspective, 1958
YRN	[N]	Young R. Niebuhr's Early Writings. Ed. Chrystal, 1977

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Vom Vater hab ich die Statur,
des Lebens ernste Führung;
Von Mutter hab ich die Froh-Natur
die Lust zum Fabulieren.[1]

"I never considered myself a doubting believer or a believing doubter." This statement is to be found in June Bingham's book *Courage to Change: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr.*[2] Should it be understood with reference to Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), then only with a healthy respect for ambiguity. A doubting believer is one who is secure enough in his belief that a God does exist to question the specifics of this belief and grow into a greater understanding of human existence and participation in the divine. Niebuhr would contrast this with conservative Christian beliefs, or even secular beliefs, which tend toward a meaning that leaves no room to mystery as an important aspect of meaning. A believing doubter is one who has an open mind toward something which may not be immediately explicable, and yet has a penchant for solving the equation of human existence in terms of meaning. For Karl Rahner (1904-1984), the contemporary human being "who consciously reflects upon and recognizes the fact that his own knowledge is subject to historical conditioning, and that it is impossible for him to achieve any completely adequate reflection upon the

[1] "From the father I have the stature for serious leadership in life; from the mother I have the mirth, the craving for fantasizing." Dr. Samuel D. Press, an influential figure in Niebuhr's school days, typed these words from J. W. Goethe (1749-1832) and noted: "this R.[einhold] N.[iebuhr] to a T." (W.G. Chrystal, "Samuel D. Press: Teacher of the Niebuhrs." *Church History* 53/4 [Dec. 1984]: 504-21; the passage from Goethe is cited by Chrystal in YRN, 1977, p. 23).
[2] Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1972, p. 11.

presuppositions of his own knowledge, can achieve a typical standpoint with regard to his own self in a way which was quite impossible in earlier times" (TI 11, 80). Niebuhr and Rahner do emphasize the necessity of historical consciousness and the attempt to consider religion from a perspective deeper than one which anthropomorphizes God and thus creates the problem of searching for meaning only.

Niebuhr argues for people to understand the ambiguousness of history. The sermons he gave are not for those who wish to hear platitudes about how Jesus died on the Cross and saved all humanity. This is of importance to him, but what does this mean for Christians? How is this salvation worked out? In "Be Not Anxious" Niebuhr recalls that the Bible "has laid the hazardous affirmation that human history is meaningful", and that since "history is but an elaboration of nature, it is surely more naive and yet profound to assert that history cannot be redeemed unless nature is transformed, than to expect—as all modern utopianism does—the fulfillment of an unconditioned good on the basis of the contingent conditions of nature-history".[3]

Before describing who Niebuhr was and what he thought of himself, we shall say briefly what he was not. He did not claim to know about the finer points of pure theology. Often asked to assert that his interests were theological rather than practical, he always refused to enter such a debate "partly because I thought the point was well taken and partly because the distinction did not interest me" (KeB 3). His interest was to find the meaning behind our thoughts: the real situation is that we human beings, as part of the natural world, bring our years to an end like a tale that is told, and that as a free unity of body and spirit we cannot reduce ourselves to the dimension of pure spirit through

[3] "Be Not Anxious," a sermon at Memorial Church, Harvard, held on October 22, 1961, published in R. Niebuhr, *Justice and Mercy*. Ed. Ursula M. Niebuhr (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 77-78.

thinking. “Faith is therefore the final triumph over incongruity, the final assertion of the meaningfulness of existence. […] Faith is the final assertion of the freedom, but is also the final acceptance of the weakness of the human spirit and the final solution for the problem of life through the disavowal of any final solutions” in our power. (DST 130)

According to Gordon Harland, “the core” of Niebuhr’s theology “was a powerful sin-bearing love of the Cross of Christ as the suffering, sin-bearing, love of God which is the sustaining ground of forgiveness and love” (ChF 14). This is a correction from the often mistaken image of Niebuhr as concerned primarily with sin—an image which Gabriel Fackre rectifies without being at odds with Harland when he writes that the “center of Niebuhr’s thought is anthropology” (quoted in PRN 32). Niebuhr and Rahner come indeed very close as far as anthropology is concerned. Niebuhr begins *The Nature and Destiny of Man* by stating the following: “Man is his own most vexing problem. How shall he think of himself? […] Man is, and yet is not involved in the flux of nature and time” (ND 1 & 2). For Rahner, “Man is the question in which there is no answer. […] Man is a mystery. Indeed, he is *the* mystery. For he is mystery not merely because he is open in his poverty to the mystery of the incomprehensible fullness of God, but because God uttered this mystery as his own.” (CC 7; see also TI 4, 119-20)

Both theologians spent a good deal of their writing and action answering this question. Rahner dealt with it in a more philosophical and theological way, which can leave even Rahner specialists at a loss. And yet, aspects of his program may be compared to Niebuhr’s books such as *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941), *Faith and History* (1949), or *The Self and the Dramas of History* (1955), even though they did use different

language and Niebuhr did attack the deeper traditions of the Roman Catholic Church in his articles. (see Ach)

Niebuhr's involvement in the American Social Gospel and its passion and concern for social justice has been very important. Although he shared its concern for justice sometimes more radically than the leaders of the Social Gospel movement, he found the movement wanting in certain respects. "First, the Social Gospel's sentimental view of human nature meant that it could not properly attend to its own great concern—the problem of [human beings] in community. Secondly, it was politically defective in that it did not properly assess the reality and the power of self-interest. Thirdly, it did not sufficiently develop the theological foundations necessary to deal with the ultimate questions of life." (ChF 14)

Reinhold Niebuhr was born in Wright City, Missouri, in 1892. He was the fourth of five children born to Gustav and Hulda Niebuhr. His father was the pastor of the town. By ten Reinhold believed his father was the most interesting person in town, and he wanted to become a minister (KeB 3). "I have taught Christian Social Ethics for a quarter of a century and have dealt in the ancillary field of 'apologetics.' My vocational interest as a kind of circuit rider in the colleges and universities has prompted an interest in the defense and justification of the Christian faith in a secular age [he saw this as early as 1926; some still do not], particularly what Schleiermacher called Christianity's 'intellectual despiser's.'" (KeB 3)

His Detroit experience from 1915 to 1928 taught him that there were two false answers in relating gospel and world. His revolt against both a theology to the left ('liberalism') and a theology to the right ('orthodoxy') fused into what he called

'Christian realism.' While not unique to Niebuhr, this expression was definitely his own since he began his career as an uncritical liberal who felt Marxism was best at qualifying Christianity; and yet he became one of liberalism's most ardent critics. For John C. Bennett, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) is the beginning of Niebuhr's break with Marxism, and also with pacifism. Many Christian pacifists identified themselves with Gandhi because they believed that he had given them a political alternative to Marxism and to the conventional military approach to international conflicts. "They transferred to Gandhi's program the absolute claims which had been associated with Christian non-resistance." (KeB 65-66)

While looking at Niebuhr's theology, Rahner often comes to mind as someone who felt the need to constantly renew the effort of dealing with theological issues: "I can still remember those who taught me theology then, and so can still perceive how they felt themselves and how they understood their situation. […] These theologians of the generation before our own went about their work in a theological territory which was already defined for them, one with which they were familiar. They spoke a common language" (TI 11, 70). Rahner was convinced that "We must think if we are to say anything that matters in theology. […] Our thinking must be from the modern situation, from modern philosophy, and this may be done without preconceived ideas" (in Vorgrimler 1965, 52). "His Jesuit training, especially the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius, sharpened his sense of finding God in all things. During his seminary training he recognized the limitations of his required courses in Thomistic philosophy and, therefore, spent a good deal of time assimilating the thought of more modern authors, especially Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), whose 'Copernican revolution' placed the human knower at

the centre of his philosophy."[4] The Belgian Joseph Maréchal (1878-1944) and the French Jesuit Pierre Rousselot (1878-1915) were most influential in Rahner's own interpretation of Thomas Aquinas (1224/5-1274). Many proponents of a 'new theology' were concerned to retrieve the 'real' Thomas "from the deformations of his neo-scholastic interpreters and to show them that there was an experiential awareness in Thomas that opened him to relationship with contemporary philosophical currents, particularly 'the turn to the subject' which emphasized the role of human experience". (CaCR 3)

In the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1831) and Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) we see a decisive turn to an understanding of religious truth that may rightly be called existentialism. Theology "now had to start from, to articulate, and to interpret a subjective view of the religious object. That is, any significant speech about God had to talk in a way in which the self was concerned, talk about God as the object of devotion, or of utter dependence, or of passionate concern and fidelity."[5]

This study entails four chapters. It begins with myth as the foundation of meaning and discusses how Niebuhr uses the term 'myth' and what it means to him. His employment of myth does show how much difference there is between him and Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) on whose 'program' of demythologization Niebuhr wrote disfavourably (see # 1.2). Also important for Niebuhr's discussion of meaning, is the fact that creation for him, although vital to revelation, is not itself a part of the doctrine of revelation. As to faith, it is more than mere belief; rather, it is a trust that there is meaning to human existence. This is, as Langdon Gilkey rightly suggests, an overlooked aspect in

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[4] James J. Bacik, *Contemporary Theologians* (New York: Triumph Books, 1989), 14.
[5] Claude Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century,* vol. 1 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 59-60. See also F. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), Bk. I sec. i.

Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932), a manifesto against the utopianism of Social Gospel practitioners that entails relevant elements still today. Significant to Niebuhr's notion of meaning are his thoughts on partial meanings, congruities and incongruities or ambiguities (see # 1.7); we often believe that truth can be found as if it were a concept for finite minds to grasp. Important to note is Niebuhr's awareness of the vicissitudes of life and history within the scope of meaning. He does not attempt to fit things into the neat equation of a syllogism: if A, then B and C. He has been often misunderstood and criticized for his sometimes open-ended and yet profound arguments. His basic premise regarding meaning is that mystery does not obstruct, but augments the meaning of life, history, and human existence. Niebuhr's sense of meaning (see # 1.6) coalesces with Rahner's similar thoughts on the matter.

Chapter two on mystery begins with an analysis of *The Self and the Dramas of History* (1955). Here, Niebuhr focuses on ultimate meaning and ultimate mystery, which human beings find beyond rational faculties. Both Niebuhr and Rahner speak of anthropological concerns which do not conflict with theology or christology.[6] They strengthen these concerns and highlight the fact that speaking of God cannot be done from God's vantage unless we know God's vantage. "Christian Faith in the Modern World" (1930)[7] provides an insight into Niebuhr's earlier ideas on religion and science and how they may refer to his later views on the church and secularism. After noting that meaning and mystery are closely related in Niebuhr's thought I discuss God as mystery and symbol. Although

[6] For a fuller explanation of this see K. Rahner, "The Two Basic Types of Christology" (TI 13 & 15) and "Theology and Anthropology" (TI 9, 2). One may compare this with Paul Lehmann's mythical and reverse christology, which is not necessarily the so-called "low christology" he claims Niebuhr is using.

[7] In *Ventures in Belief: Christian Convictions in a Time of Uncertainty*. Ed. H. P. Van Dusen (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930), 5-22. Abbr.: **CFMW**

Niebuhr did not develop a doctrine of God we are able to gain an understanding of his thought on this subject. Included are salient points from Rahner's own view of God. Appended to this chapter is a textual examination of Niebuhr's sermon *Mystery and Meaning,* which has become a popular illustration of his thought, and of the biblical epistemology he brought to his analyses of individuals and groups. Also *Coherence, Incoherence and the Christian Faith* is a text related as much to meaning as it is to mystery.

Chapter three on Niebuhr's method begins with a brief outline of liberalism, since it is the *Sitz im Leben* which influenced Niebuhr's thought most, both positively and negatively. This is followed by a critical analysis of the terms used to qualify Niebuhr's thought: 'neo-orthodox,' 'neoliberal,' 'post-liberal,' and 'creative liberal.' We consider the variations and influences of Niebuhr's thought, keeping in mind that he was not a systematic theologian but a casual writer who covered the central issues of theology. Is there a centre to Niebuhr's thought, something to which he gave special significance? Lehmann and Harland both defended christology as the nexus of his thought, which influenced and pervaded his political and theological work. To some extent this was a just reaction to those who portrayed Niebuhr as obsessed with sin and pessimism. This chapter also discusses what Niebuhr calls 'Christian realism,' which is the central notion of his life and work. After testing the waters of Marxism and its rather idealistic vision of social reform, Niebuhr managed to draw a middle ground between pessimism/despair and utopianism/sentimentalism, which he termed 'Christian realism.' He reacted against Karl Barth (1886-1968) who tended to view the world *sub specie aeternitatis*. Niebuhr has been misrepresented as not caring for the salvation of human beings. Briefly, there is a

strain of thinking that if one places emphasis on social problems, including social salvation, it is necessarily to the detriment of the individual. Such an assertion forgets that individuals create social groups and are treated differently by Niebuhr in his theology of personhood and in his theology of sin. This is addressed in chapter four on Niebuhr's idea of mystagogy.

Chapter four begins with a brief historical introduction to mystagogy and how the basically Roman Catholic term '*mystagogia'* applies to this Protestant thinker, that is, how and to what extent Niebuhr is a mystagogical thinker and practitioner. The section on practical grace meets the fundamentals of Niebuhr in his daily business of correcting utopians and perfectionists where and when he found them, as well as in his writings on the experience of God's grace. Here, the experience Niebuhr had in Detroit is relevant. He was no stranger to those who worked for Henry Ford and suffered through his retooling period, when the company needed to answer public demand with a new model, cost many of his employees, a full year of labour. The new Model A began design in 1926 and was first displayed in 1927. Niebuhr found himself a part of the Social Gospel movement and wrote for *The Christian Century* against Ford's practices. This provides the background for a comparison with Rahner's understanding of mystagogy.

According to Johann Baptist Metz (b. 1928), Rahner's is theology as biography. Unfortunately,

> religious experience, the articulation of Christian history in the presence of God and the idea of mystical biography became more and more overshadowed by doxography, with the result that the contents of that experience were interpreted in a more and more subjective and impressionistic way and theology thus became less and less capable of making those contents the public property of the Church and society. (FaHS 219)

> Rahner, when asked about the modern problem of atheism, put it this way: The essential question is something like this: How do I share with a person what I mean by the experience of God? […] One needs a 'mystagogy' in order to enter into this God experience. God doesn't simply come into a person through 'indoctrination.' It's not the same as teaching someone about life in Australia. A doctrine about God must be united with a particular irrefutable experience. Obviously, a catechism isn't absolutely necessary. In fact, it might even present further difficulties. In any event, the Church must carefully consider the issue in a way that conforms more to the public consciousness. (KRD 283-4)

When we learn about God we discover that this

> absolute self-bestowal of God is made apprehensible, revealed, and imparted through a historical medium, one which can, in the power of God's all-embracing will to save, extend its influence universally to all ages, peoples and cultural environments. This is Jesus Christ who as God-man is unique. He is the salvation of those who know that they believe in him, and also of those who do actually believe even though they suppose that they do not. (TI 7, 207)

For in Jesus Christ "the question which calls everything in life, right up to the point of death itself, in question has been answered with the only answer possible, the infinitude of the blessed mystery of God" (TI 7, 207-8). Phillip Endean notes that if

> all Rahner's writings arise from a conviction that God is present in experience, this renders his work profoundly unitary, but at the same time this vision also yields a very *untidy* account of God. The God who speaks in our experience, the God who is in our experience, must be unsystematic and pluriform as we are. In the end any theology worthy of the name must be a mixture of clarity reducing to first principles and an openness to a God of freedom, who will be for us into our unknown future.[8]

[8] K. Rahner: *Spiritual Writings*. Ed. Philip Endean. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 11. – In a paper on "Reflections on Methodology in Theology" he gave in the summer 1969 in Montreal (TI 11, 68-114 – particularly part 3, par. 1), Rahner did insist on the necessity of 'reduction' (i.e. drawing back - according to the Latin *reducere* – in order to provide an explanation) as the core of his method. He called it "*reductio in mysterium"* – "reduction into mystery". Such a 'bringing back' takes place between the two dimensions of 'meaning' and of 'mystery' with the task of illuminating meaning through reference to mystery, and of elaborating the proper significance of mystery for meaning. Thus, 'reduction' as a method is the third dimension of religious knowledge along with the first two dimensions (i.e. meaning, and mystery), followed by a fourth dimension called 'mystagogy', i.e. communication.

It is my contention that myth, for Niebuhr, holds his entire thought together. Whether one would call it the centre of his thought is another thing. When Lehmann's essay on christology used the expression 'mythical Christology,' he was accused in political circles of being too much of a mythmaker. He saw that only a mythical christology represents the kind of christology that does not emphasize what is called 'low' or 'high' christology but a real christology, which is what Rahner also argued for in "Two Basic Types of Christology" (TI 13, 15; see also TI 1, 5). When Langdon Gilkey in "The Hermeneutics of Mystagogy" analyzed watchwords used by conservative evangelicals to indicate what is real and true in their interpretation of Scripture, he equated this with a mythological reading of the Bible and with what Niebuhr calls true religion. One expression often used is the 'call-to-Niebuhrian-arms.' It seems one can cry out we should have a voice such as Niebuhr's, no matter what one's own religious or political view might be. This is certainly not part of Niebuhrian style. Yet we must also be aware that while Niebuhr became critical of Marxism and especially of religious liberalism, he was neither a conservative, although many right-wing agents enjoy officiating Niebuhr into their hermeneutical corner.

CHAPTER ONE - MEANING

> […] every proposal from any of us is fragmentary, tentative, and vulnerable. Another can see these holes in our defenses more clearly than we, and we can only be encouraged to strengthen the entire edifice if some critical but interested eye has surveyed our efforts with candor.
>
> (Langdon Gilkey)[1]

The importance of meaning for Niebuhr comes from the relevance of its relation to mystery. The relation between meaning and mystery provides the basis of Niebuhr's sociological and epistemological approach to the experiences and actions of individuals and groups. This extends to the way different groups of people believe they understand and know God: some accentuate the one and only need for meaning, whereas others become lost in the idea that all things divine are mysterious, and thus above and beyond meaning. According to Langdon Gilkey (1919-2004), such a state of affairs is made possible through what Niebuhr calls the limited transcendence of human being – namely the fact that human being is ***at once*** *creatura dei* (dependent and horizontal) and *imago dei* (transcendent and vertical) [NTH 38-44]. Our ability to transcend the flux of nature allows us to sense the existence of something above our world of meaning. This penumbra of mystery gives relevance to our partial meanings and the knowledge that there is never complete understanding within our scope of discernment, and hence within history. Yet we do not completely transcend the flux

[1] L. Gilkey, "A Theology in Process: Schubert Ogden's Developing Theology." *Interpretation* 21 (Oct. 1967): 458-9.

of nature that makes us dependent and anxious beings. We have a hard time to understand the passage concerning Jesus' care of the flowers and their freedom from worry with reference to our own situation (Mt 6:28). Since we are not just simple organic species with no reflective qualities we sometimes ponder too deeply about matters which need not be dwelt on.[2]

1.1 Myth as the Foundation of Meaning

Niebuhr's thought concerning myth is influenced by Paul Tillich (1886-1965) for whom, as he suggested in 1925 in *Religionsphilosophie*,[3] the language of myth presents itself in a threefold way: "as a myth of being, a myth of history, and a myth of the absolute idea, or in the language of myth itself, as creation, redemption, and fulfillment."[4] So it is reasonable that Tillich finds in Niebuhr's theology "the history of creation, fall, salvation, and consummation" (KeB 39). For Niebuhr,

> A philosophy of history adequate to bring all of the various perspectives together, from those of the economists and political strategists to the insights of artists and moralists, into a total unity must be endowed with the highest imagination. It must combine the exact data of the scientist with the vision of the artist and must add religious depth to philosophical generalizations; an adequate philosophy of history must […] be a mythology." (REnE 122)

Niebuhr is not satisfied with a sense of meaning that regards life as fulfilling itself within history; he repeats this thought concerning myths and symbols

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[2] R. Niebuhr, "Be Not Anxious." In R. Niebuhr, *Justice and Mercy.* New York: Harper & Row, 1974, 81.

[3] In *Lehrbuch der Philosophie.* Ed. M. Dessoir. Berlin: Ullstein; later published in P. Tillich, *What Is Religion?* Trans. J. Luther Adams (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 101-5.

[4] Tillich 1969, 105. – In the *Summa Theologiae,* Part 1, question 73 Thomas Aquinas talks about "that which pertains to the seventh day" in the first biblical narrative of the creation (Gn 1: 1-2:4). Article 1 *ad primum* talks about the fulfillment (*consummatio)* of nature on the "seventh day", of grace in the incarnation of Christ, and of glory at the end of the world.

throughout his works. In a 1971 essay he shows the strength of pluralistic religions which retain their sense of mystery.[5] Knowledge and experience always point to a source of meaning in life which transcends knowledge and experience. A Christian answer to the meaning of human existence must not be sought for in partial and individual questions of meaning; this is how ideologies find their answers, and Christianity, Rahner concludes, is not an ideology. "Ideologies are unable to point to something transcendent; they mutually exclude one another, and therefore in the end turn themselves into the Absolute. Christianity's main task is to strive toward a correct teaching concerning the Absolute" (TI 18, 15; TI 6, 4). Biblical symbols are to be taken seriously, but not literally (ND 2, 50 & 289). If the symbols are not taken seriously, "concepts of an eternity are connoted in which history is destroyed and not fulfilled." (ND 2, 50)

In *Reflections on the End of an Era* (1934), Niebuhr devotes a chapter to the Marxist mythology which he finds most insightful and capable of dealing with the problems of life better than orthodox or liberal Christianity. When Niebuhr refers to orthodox Christianity, critics, namely people who realize the implications of words such as the word 'orthodox', accuse him of loosely referring to anything from Augustine through the medieval period, up to and including the leading figures of the Reformation. But Niebuhr has in mind that form of Christianity "which remained unmoved by the rationalism of the eighteenth century and the discoveries of modern

[5] "Mission and Opportunity: Religion in a Pluralistic Culture." In *Social Responsibility in an Age of* Revolution. Ed. Louis Finkelstein (New York: The Jewish Seminary of America, 1971), 186-8.

science or liberal Christianity" (RN 76). A similar allegation can be made with regard to his treatment of liberal Christianity.

Religious myths point to the ground and the ultimate fulfillment of existence; theology and philosophy are two stages in the direction from myth to rational consistency (RN 77). Kenneth Durkin explains that for Niebuhr, "theology is an attempt to construct a rational and systematic view of life out of the mythology of a religious tradition; philosophy attempts to dispense with myth altogether in an effort to form rational consistency" (RN 77). It would appear that such rationalization is inevitable and necessary; yet, mythical thought is both pre-scientific and supra-scientific: "It deals with vertical aspects of reality which transcend the horizontal relationships which science analyses, charts and records. The classical myth refers to the transcendent source and end of existence without abstracting it from existence" (InCE 26). This linkage of myth with true religion is central for Niebuhr because in prophetic religion there is an undeniable link to ultimate meaning as the ground and fulfillment of human existence, which is expressed by both Niebuhr and Rahner, albeit in a different terminology. Rahner in an essay which regards the possible course for the future of theology notes that theology is always demythologizing in that it devises fresh statements of the ancient faith. When Niebuhr refers to prophetic religion he means that religion which is coherent and has ultimate meaning. Niebuhr's Biblical hermeneutic mythically interprets certain portions of the Bible which he understands as God entering history, the primitive myth veiled in human language to express the permanent myth or the kerygma.

Myth is a central element in the development of a useful theology. When Niebuhr waives the title of theologian, it is because he does not see creating a systematic theology in several volumes pertaining to the doctrine of God, christology, theological anthropology, ecclesiology, and pneumatology. He is dealing with authentic mythology which portrays the horizon or the ground of meaning by telling the story of the origins of the world. Myth "is the first step of understanding our deepest religious apprehensions; it is the prototype of theology" (RSF 103). Myth is not the first religious thought human beings acquired, and it is certainly neither the first nor the most significant factor in religious awareness, since the desire to understand, while a peculiar and unique characteristic of human beings, is not the most fundamental level of our being. Niebuhr does agree with Gilkey's assumption that mythical thinking is simply pre-scientific thinking, which has not learned to analyze the relation of things to each other before fitting them into its picture of the whole (InCE 25). For Gilkey, religion originates objectively in deep pre-reflective levels of awareness, in 'prehensions' of the sacral forces on which human beings depend (RSF 103). At the same time human beings discovered their capacity for self-awareness they discovered their dependence on the social aspect of their being, and religion is the communal acknowledgement and appeasement of a deity learned of by means of natural revelation (storms, plagues, natural catastrophes) and psychological hardships (group anxiety, personal anxiety, despair and guilt).

The source of authentic mythology is the Hebrew prophetic religion or the religion of revelation (InCE 22) which unfolds the great myths of the beginning and

the end of existence. True religion or high religion is also emphasized by Niebuhr as a religion that brings the whole of reality into some system of coherence:

> High religions are thus distinguished by the extent of the unity and coherence of life which they seek to encompass and the sense of a transcendent source of meaning by which alone confidence in the meaningfulness of life and existence can be maintained. The dimension of depth in religion is not created simply by the effort to solve the problem of unity in the total breadth of life. The dimension of depth is really prior to any experience of breadth; for the assumption that life is meaningful and that its meaning transcends the observable facts of existence is involved in all achievements of knowledge by which life in its richness and contradictions is apprehended. (InCE 7-8)

The primitives are satisfied by a limited cosmos and the moderns by a superficial one (InCE 3). This is why Gilkey believes myth is also the prototype of cosmology (RSF 104); myth does not make the error of advocating a limited or three-storied cosmos by literalizing the creation myth or the symbols of the *eschata*, nor does it mistakenly intellectualize a belief in a literal understanding of itself. Mythology as a prototype for theology and cosmology also secures the use of symbols for interpreting or demythologizing the 'moments' of the divine in history. Rather than relying on the Greek philosophical interpretation Niebuhr relies on what he calls a Biblical understanding of religion, faith, myth, and theology. For Gilkey, the Hebrew religious mind "was always most entirely concerned with the religious questions of meaning and destiny, while seemingly quite indifferent to the questions which scientists and philosophers raised" (MaHE 27). Niebuhr also is concerned not with historical particularities as science is, which quickly disregards primitive mythologies. The phenomenological disposition of scientific investigation is to investigate the facts and understand what it can. Unfortunately, the difficult

relationship between religion and science has caused each to encroach into the other's domain, and this has forced religion to understand divine activity in history as literal, and to become bad science; science, on the other hand, too sure of its achievements, has raised itself toward an imaginary ultimacy in meaning and has become bad religion. (FaH 33; TiM 122)

Niebuhr reacted negatively to Bultmann's program of demythologization in 1955 (see SeDH 97-98). Later on he did understand Bultmann's demythologization more positively and realized that his own Biblical hermeneutic was significantly similar to Bultmann's. When *Beyond Tragedy* was published (1937), Niebuhr's concept of mythology was already fairly well developed, and he used the analogy of an artwork and a photograph to describe the difference between symbolism and literalism (BeT 4-5). According to Hans Hofmann, Bultmann and Niebuhr "understand the concept of myth very differently, although the difference cannot be illustrated […] by a series of selected quotations" (Hofmann 1956, 75). However, one quote does exemplify the agreement between them concerning the concept of myth:

> In myth there finds expression the faith that the known and manageable world in which man lives does not have its source nor its goal in itself, that its foundations and boundaries lie beyond the known and the manageable, that this known is permeated, directed and threatened by the uncanny powers which form its basis and its limits. At the same time, myth expresses the knowledge that man is not master of himself, but is essentially dependent upon that which is beyond the known forces governing the world, and that in this very dependence he becomes free from the dominance of the known powers.[6]

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[6] R. Bultmann, "Neues Testament und Mythologie: Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung." In *Kerygma und Mythos, ein theologisches Gespräch* (Hamburg:

Hofmann refers to another instance which places Bultmann and Niebuhr at odds: whereas Niebuhr believes that myth expresses a supra-rational and supra-historical truth about human beings, Bultmann writes: "The true import of myth is not to give a picture of the objective world. It expresses rather the way in which a man understands himself in his world. Myth should not be interpreted cosmologically but anthropologically—or better existentially. Myth speaks of the power or powers which man believes he experiences as the foundation and the limits of his world and of his own action and emotion." (ThNT 23 translated & quoted in Hofmann, 75-76)

According to Hofmann, Niebuhr believes that myth is the word of God to human beings from beyond the boundaries of human knowledge; it is the word which sets human beings right. "For Niebuhr, therefore, myth is the word of God spoken in our language in order that man may learn from God that truth is not an objective thing but the living and reciprocal relatedness of God and men" (Hofmann 1956, 77). For Bultmann, myth has always an objective content: it is the world picture and the representation – and even interpretation - of "the envelope which the men of the Biblical age have used to enclose their understanding of life when they were confronted with the redeeming activity of God" (Hofmann 1956, 77-78). This issue deserves a comparative study showing that Niebuhr's and Bultmann's understanding

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Herbert Reich, 1948), pp. 15-63; quoted in Hofmann 1956, 75.

of myth might have differed in some respect and yet was basically similar.

1.2 Demythologization at Work: Rudolf Bultmann

Bultmann's demythologization is an attempt to get at the meaning of the biblical text by unfettering it from a mythological language that can only hinder understanding. While the Hebrew narratives speak of God's intervention in history, the science of history cannot assert such an act of God; it only claims that there are people who by faith believe that God acts in history. While the science of history examines the biblical texts as historical documents, it must be kept in mind that these texts do not claim to be such, and also that - although written in a given place and at a certain time - their authors and composition are not always verifiable. They are, more accurately, witnesses of faith and its proclamation. They come to us in a strange and foreign language and in concepts of faraway lands - both spatially and temporally - in need of translation, which is the work of the historian who through an existential concern is able to understand history's objective content.[7]

Another reason why Bultmann demythologizes the biblical text is because modern human being finds it "no longer possible for anyone seriously to hold the New Testament view of the world" (KeM 4). We no longer believe in the three-storied universe which the creeds take for granted. "No one who is old enough to think for himself supposes that God lives in a local heaven. […] And if this is so, the story of Christ's descent into hell and of his Ascension into heaven is done with.

[7] R. Bultmann, "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?" In R. Bultmann, *Existence and Faith* (New York: World Publishing, 1960), 289-96.

We can no longer look for the return of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven or hope that the faithful will meet him in the air" (KeM 4). Before we accuse Bultmann of unabashedly removing all that is sacred from the biblical text, one should look closer at Bultmann's "practice of demythologization," for example the way Kendrick Grobel (1908-1965) did with reference to Bultmann's sermons (PoD 28-31):

> Interpretation, for Bultmann, is a servant discipline ancillary to the church's proclamation. Interpretation is not complete until it issues from the pulpit, and not even then! […] All biblical interpretation is complete only when it has brought the proclamation effectively into the man in the pew. Whose proclamation is it? The preacher's? Only on command. The church's? Only as a loan. God's? Yes, His alone. Bultmann's doctrine of the Word of God is just as high as Karl Barth's, but with almost exclusive emphasis upon Barth's third form, the living Word speaking now through Scripture and preacher to living men. (PoD 29)

A more pertinent reason for Bultmann's demythologization is given by the proper task of interpretating the Word of God. "All interpretation is for God; all interpretation is for the man in the pew; it is an indispensable link in bringing them together. Interpretation matters supremely! If the sermon has soteriological significance, so has the interpretation which mediates it. Bultmann claims that the sermon (every true sermon, as released Word of God) is part and parcel of the salvation-occurrence itself, indeed the really relevant aspect of it to men today"(PoD 29). Grobel notes that since "for Bultmann (as for Barth and the European church in general) all preaching is either expository or it simply is not preaching, one cannot understand the earnestness and intensity of Bultmann's concern for ultimate interpretability." (PoD 29)

Bultmann believes in expository preaching and also in the adequate

interpretation of the Word of God. To demythologize the Scriptures "is to make them more accessible to moderns; the miracles of the New Testament have ceased to be miraculous, and to defend their historicity by recourse to nervous disorders or hypnotic effects only serves to underline the fact" (KeM 5). Bultmann does not wish to make an outmoded cosmology an article of faith. Struggling with how a Christian ought to believe, Bultmann says that Christians want to hold on to Christian faith and at the same time they suppose that as a Christian one is obliged to regard such stories as true; "and since they cannot do that, they fall into doubt whether they have the right to be called Christians" (PoD 29). Regarding the New Testament miracle-stories as true is certainly not what Christian faith means. "Christian faith does mean: faith in the grace of God as it presents itself to us in Christ" (PoD 29). What of those who nevertheless insist that believing in miracle-stories belongs to the Christian faith? "In fact, they say, Christian faith manifests itself precisely in so regarding them!" It does so, "because Christian faith means letting God take captive not only all our will but also all our thinking so that it will not assert itself against God's Word. Since we must sacrifice to God, as men of faith, all we have and are, we must also sacrifice to Him our thinking. Consequently, they conclude, if miraculous occurrence […] is impossible to modern thinking, then what is wrong with modern thinking? We must sacrifice it!"[8] There is truth in these words. It is true that we must let God take our thinking captive. But we must ask more exactly what that means. It simply cannot mean that we are to give up thinking entirely, that we are to choke truthfulness to

[8] PoD 29. – Grobel is quoting from Bultmann's Marburger Predigten (1956), pp. 93-95.

death (PoD 29). Myth, according to Bultmann, is not to be *rejected* but *interpreted*. The problem is hermeneutical, and Bultmann's view of interpretation informs his handling of myth.[9]

1.2.1 The Nature of Interpretation

The twentieth century has seen a shift in emphasis from the attempt to demonstrate the truth of the Christian faith to the clarification of the meaning of it. Demythologization is Bultmann's response to the basic problem of meaning. What does the biblical text mean for us today? As soon as one undertakes to interpret a text written in an ancient or a foreign language, one must be aware of, and follow, the rules of the grammar used in the text. It simply will not do to impose our modern grammar on these texts. There is also the attention to the historical context (HiE 139). The objectives of interpretation may be a reconstruction of the continuum of past history, whether political history, the history of forms and problems of social life, intellectual history, or the history of culture in the broadest sense. In this case the interpretation is always determined by the understanding the interpreter has of history. The objective of interpretation can also be based on a psychological interest (individual, social, or religious). In these cases the interpretation is guided by a preunderstanding of psychological phenomena, but preunderstanding is not limited to only the psychological. It is also possible to give interpretation an aesthetic interest which subjects the text to a formal analysis and questioning. The objective of interpretation also can be based on an interest in history as "the sphere of life in

[9] See John Macquarrie, "Bultmann's Existential Approach to Theology." USQR 12/4 (May 1957): 18.

which human existence takes place, in which we acquire and develop our possibilities, in which, by reflecting on these possibilities, we each come to an understanding of ourselves and of our own possibilities. In other words, the objective can be given by the question about human existence as one's own existence." (HiE 157)

1.2.2 Existential Interpretation

Bultmann is most interested in this existential component of interpretation, and here he is indebted to Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). Although it is of crucial importance to mention Heidegger along with the emphasis on understanding Scripture, this study does not take up this issue since its scope is Bultmann's understanding of myth and its influence on his eschatology. Almost all those who appraise Bultmann's theology acknowledge his indebtedness to Heidegger. Although Leopold Malevez notes in 1954 that Bultmann tends toward what he calls Heidegger's earlier nihilistic thought,[10] Schubert M. Ogden and John Macquarrie agree that Bultmann's understanding of human existence presupposed in almost all his theological works is precisely the one developed by Heidegger (CWM 45-46). However, in a letter to André Malet, Bultmann acknowledges that Malet shows correctly "that my theology does not depend on Heidegger's 'philosophy'; that on the contrary the significance of his existential analysis, so far as I am concerned, is that it provides an adequate terminology (*Begrifflichkeit*) for setting forth the New

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[10] L. Malevez, *Le message chrétien et le mythe*. Brussels: Desclée de Brouwer. – *The Christian Message and Myth:The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*. Trans. Olive Wyon (London: SCM Press, 1958), 29.

Testament and the Christian faith."[11] Malet contends that if, Bultmann has adopted Heidegger's analysis because on the ontological plane Heidegger is more faithful to the New Testament than many a professional exegete and theologian, [he] does not depend on him in the slightest, since on the one hand Heidegger has only rediscovered New Testament ontology, and on the other hand ontological analysis does not take into account man's concrete footing with God." (TRB 332)

1.2.3 The Nature of Myth

Bultmann's aim is not to simply eliminate myth, but to interpret the mythical passages of Scripture. "Of course it may still be necessary to eliminate mythology here and there. But the criterion adopted must be taken not from modern thought, but from the understanding of human existence which the New Testament itself enshrines" (KeM 12). Interpretation is about asking the right questions to the text. Each person who questions the text is in one way or another guided by a preunderstanding of human existence that alone makes questioning possible, as when one asks, for example, about 'salvation', or about the 'meaning' of one's personal life or of history, or about the norms of moral action and of order in human community (HiE 151). Because texts remain silent without this preunderstanding, the point is not to get rid of preunderstanding but to raise the level of consciousness, and to test it critically. In questioning the text, one must be questioned by the text and give heed to its claim (HiE 157). According to Bultmann, then, if we are to

[11] A. Malet, *The Thought of Rudolf Bultmann* (Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1961), 2.

avoid the mistakes of liberal theology and yet at the same time deal with the problems presented by the biblical world-picture, "we must devote ourselves to interpreting the biblical myths critically in terms of the existential understanding of existence they basically seek to express" (CWM 44). The "real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives. Myth should be interpreted not cosmologically, but anthropologically, or better still, existentially" (KeM 10).

'Myth' here is used in the sense popularized by the 'History of Religions' school. Mythology is the use of imagery to express the other-worldly in terms of this world, and then the divine in terms of human life, the 'other' side in terms of 'this' side. For instance, divine transcendence is expressed as spatial distance - a mode of expression which makes it easy to understand cultus as action in which material means are used to convey immaterial power. 'Myth' is not used in the modern sense according to which it is practically equivalent to ideology (KeM 10). According to Malet,

> The purpose of myth is altogether different from science, which tends to reduce the 'other' to the 'same.' By contrast with rational thought, myth seeks to stress the fact that the world and its events are 'open' to one *Daβ* or more that are not part of the world. It attributes certain phenomena to supernatural powers, whether envisaged in animist or in dynamic fashion, or else to personal spirits and gods. Thus it presupposes the existence of an entire sphere beyond man's control, which he can never fathom or master. It intends to express what is wholly other than man and man's world: there is its real significance.[12]

[12] TRB 45. - *Daβ*, Malet explains on page 7, is opposed to *Was*: "The *Was* is what (a thing is), what it has in common with others; whereas the *Daβ* expresses the that, sheer otherness. The 'what' is the conceptual content, the nature, the essence, the substance. The 'that' expresses advent and event.

For Malet, "'the' scientific scheme expresses man's will to grasp everything, to owe everything to himself alone. Contrariwise the mythical scheme expresses man's conviction that he depends on a power to which he owes his being now and in the time to come." (TRB 46)

Myth points beyond the mundane to the transcendent. It allows us to understand that human life is surrounded by the enigmatic and the uncanny, as at the mercy of nature and other human beings.

> And at the same time the temptation inherent in human life is expressed in this concept, since there appears in it the will to escape from what imprisons man, to make one's self secure by outwitting the enigmatic powers through making them useful to one's self […] But certainly there is to be seen in that concept of the 'Word of God' a recognition of the truth that man knows himself to be limited by and dependent on a power which puts the world and himself beyond his control, which relegates him to the position of a creature; a power which removes his own action from the direction of his arbitrary will and prescribes what he ought to do. (SDT 152)

As Martin De Nys rightly says, "Mythological narrative language is, first, language which itself expresses a two-fold or double significance. On one level, the significance or intention of the language of myth is cosmological. The same language also expresses a 'latent' meaning, which Bultmann understands as existential. The language of myth expresses both of these levels or dimensions of meaning."[13]

Every being is at once *Was* and *Daβ*. What Peter and John have in common is that both are men, not trees or animals (the plane of the *Was*). But at the same time they are two beings absolutely irreducible to each other; each one is unique (the place of the *Daβ*)."

[13] M. J. De Nys, "Myth and Interpretation: Bultmann Revisited." *International Journal of Philosophy and Religion* 11 (1980): 35.

When we read Bultmann's definitions of myth, as awkward as they appear, it is helpful to remember Reinhold Niebuhr's favourite qualifier regarding myths: they should be taken *seriously*, but not *literally*: "Not literally, because the function of the primary meaning of the myth is to refer to and manifest another meaning distinct from itself. Seriously, because the language and primary meaning of the myth is nonetheless the vehicle through which the mythic narrative itself signifies and expresses this other, latent meaning, the medium in which that latent meaning appears" (ND 2, 50). Such narratives appear in mythical form because, according to Bultmann, these myths were created in a time when few, if any, abstract terms were available; therefore, self-understanding could find expression only in the form of a concrete story. Myth also has permanent relevance and survives even in a more sophisticated age. Macquarrie illustrates Bultmann's method of interpreting myth by looking at the Genesis narrative: "The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Ge 2:7). A literal interpretation of this narrative might satisfy a natural etiological curiosity, but bare knowledge of an objective fact presents no religious and no existential challenge (BuEA 18). Anyone who takes this myth as a literal statement of something which actually happened would miss its meaning altogether. The real purpose of myth for Bultmann is to speak about a transcendent power which controls the world and its inhabitants, but that purpose is impeded and obscured by the terms in which it is expressed. (KeM 11)

1.2.4 Mythology and Eschatology

Bultmann's understanding of eschatology is informed by his concept of myth: "It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles" (KeM 5). Related to this is Jesus' proclamation of the eschatological reign of God. Here, the only point in dispute for Bultmann is whether Jesus thought that the reign of God was imminent, or whether he thought it was already present in his person, "what today is called 'realised eschatology'" (HiE 31). However, the parousia of Christ never took place as the New Testament expected.[14] The New Testament "grew out of the fact that the expected end of the world failed to arrive, that the 'Son of Man' did not appear in the clouds of heaven, that history went on, and that the eschatological community could not fail to recognise that it had become a historical phenomenon and the Christian faith had taken on the shape of a new religion" (HiE 38). Malet defines eschatology as the next world as contrasted with this one, eternity as opposed to time, as that which is wholly other than the world and humanity. (TRB 19)

Malet's definition of eschatology is within the limits of Bultmann's definition of myth. It would lead us too far afield to offer a complete exposition of Bultmann's understanding of eschatology. Let us concentrate on two central factors in Bultmann's eschatology that might be seen as one: to be "in Christ" may be called an *ecclesiological* formula, since the body of Christ is the body of the church; but it can be called also an *eschatological* formula, since with the body of Christ the

[14] KeM 5. – See Mk 13:26-27; 1 Thess 4:16f; 1 Cor 15:51f.

eschatological event has been inaugurated (PrC 197). We will look at Bultmann's eschatological understanding of Jesus who interprets the demand of God, and at the church that authentically appropriates this demand. Bultmann does have a theology of election, but not in the sense that the church is an historical successor to Israel. Such continuity is in one sense broken off by the eschatological event of Christ: the church is now the true People of God and therefore an heir not to empirical Israel, but to ideal Israel (ThNT 96-97). The cross and resurrection form a single event which brings judgment to the world and opens up the possibility of authentic life. If this is the case, the resurrection cannot be used as a miraculous proof to convince people that the cross has the eschatological significance ascribed to it (KeM 39). It is not possible to prove an objective historicity of the resurrection by appealing to the witnesses cited by Paul, "as though once it was established it might be believed beyond all question and faith might have its unimpeachable guarantee" (KeM 40). Faith in the resurrection, for Bultmann, is faith in the saving efficacy of the Cross (KeM 41). We cannot first believe in Christ and then, upon this faith, come to believe in the saving efficacy of the Cross since the latter is always proclaimed together with the resurrection. Bultmann notes that for John the resurrection, Pentecost, and the parousia of Jesus are one and the same event: those who believe have eternal life already. "Christ meets us in the preaching as one crucified and risen. He meets us in the word of preaching and nowhere else" (JeM 33). Authoritative preaching is found only in the church, i.e. the 'ministry of reconciliation' and the 'ministry of a new covenant.' Apostolic preaching is found only within the

framework of redemptive history whose subject is the people of God (TRB 206). The church, for Bultmann, is definitely a phenomenon of the interim of history, and it abides in the eschatological position different from the way the primitive church regarded itself in apocalyptic terms as the congregation of the end of days (TRB 206; ThNT 37). "The Church is genuine Church only as an event which happens each time here and now; for the Church is the eschatological community of the saints, and it is only in a paradoxical way identical with the ecclesiastical institutions which we observe as social phenomenon of secular history" (JeM 82-83). The early Christian community understood itself as the goal and consummation of the history of salvation, and therefore looked back into the history of Israel which has now reached its goal. Bultmann does not understand the early Christian community merely as a phenomenon of history, or the relation to the Israelite people as a historical continuity. There is no real genealogical connection between the new people of God and the old. "The continuity is not continuity growing out of history but is one created by God" (HiE 34-35; ThNT 96-99). Once more, central to Bultmann's eschatological thinking is Jesus Christ as the eschatological event, "the action of God by which God has set an end to the old world." (ThNT 151n.10)

The word which the church proclaims, the word which is the demand of God spoken by Jesus, is an event which meets us in history (Schmithals 1967, 223). It existed before the canon of Scripture, which is itself a historically conditioned expression of it. There can be word without the canon of Scripture, and no special authority can be attributed to the canon over and above the word, which is not

exclusively the word of the canon. The word preached as proclamation by the church or handed down to people through the church may encounter us in many different ways. Furthermore, the word of God is what it is only in the moment in which it is spoken. "The Word of God is not a timeless statement but a concrete Word addressed to men here and now" (JeM 79). This word is very much addressed to the individual as existential event/encounter requiring a decision. It is the church that proclaims this word; but it comes as a very personal event which demands a personal decision. It would seem that Bultmann's existential philosophy of commitment to God is an individualist one; and yet we can also see that his is a social view of the church as the heir to Israel's soteriological promise, albeit not in historical continuity with Israel.

1.2.5 Rudolf Bultmann and Reinhold Niebuhr

Niebuhr was confused by Bultmann's definition of myth and by his project of demythologization. He remarks that the word 'myth' has "subjective and skeptical connotations" and that he wished he had never used it, "particularly since the project for 'demythologizing' the Bible has been undertaken" (KeB 439). Like so many others, he believed that Bultmann's laudable enterprise of cleansing the message of 'pre-scientific' myths ends in equating the kerygma with the message of existentialist philosophy. He then criticized Bultmann for his inability to save the permanent myth while doing away with the pre-scientific myth (SeDH 97). This raises concern for anyone wanting to embrace Bultmann's project of demythologization. We would add to this, though, that Bultmann's main thrust is to save the kerygma while removing

the myth which envelops and masquerades it.

Niebuhr would talk about 'permanent' and 'primitive' myth, the 'permanent' myth being the kerygmatic element of the gospel, and the 'primitive' myth being the archaic story which surrounds it. Both Niebuhr and Bultmann do reach toward the same end more than Niebuhr himself realized. Their language is different, but their understanding of myths is similar. Niebuhr does not limit his hermeneutics of myth to Christian myths, whereas Bultmann is concerned with interpreting the mythical eschatology of the Christian Bible. Niebuhr interprets the eschatological symbols in an ethical manner, with reproaches against utopian expectations of complete fulfillment within history (InCE 48-61): the "Kingdom of God as it has come in Christ means a disclosure of the meaning of history but not the full realization of that meaning" (ND 2, 288). Bultmann and Niebuhr also diverge on the way to understand the parousia. There is actually quite a difference in outlook when discussing the Christian Bible idea of the End. Symbols for Niebuhr are taken seriously but not literally, and it is unwise "for Christians to claim any knowledge of either the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell; or to be too certain about any details of the Kingdom of God in which history is consummated" (ND 2, 294). Bultmann takes the Biblical symbols seriously and appropriates them to our age. Niebuhr writes that virgins do not have babies; Bultmann would no doubt comply that this was a myth of primitive Christianity. They are like-minded when treating the fantastic stories of the Bible. At another level, Niebuhr does say - and Bultmann may not - that these myths are rooted in history. He would surely agree with Bultmann that we claim to know too

much about our eternal destinies:

> If we want to see God, we should first of all tell to ourselves that we will probably not see him the way we think; thus we should convince ourselves that he will probably look totally different from the image we did make of him; thus we should be ready to receive him even though he terrifies us. We cannot see him in the present? Our old image of him has gone astray? If so, then we want first of all to be thankful for our loss of the wrong concept of him because we can see him only how he really is.[15]

We could probably emphasize, with degrees of success, their estimable differences. Niebuhr himself did that in 1955 (see SeDH 97-98), as he contended Bultmann was tossing out the permanent myth with the primitive myth, therefore losing the credibility he was hoping to gain. However, I think it is preferable to highlight the similarities between these two influential twentieth century theologians and not to forget that Niebuhr's perspective did indeed change, as it is quite obvious in the following statement published in 1971:

> Rudolf Bultmann, who in his *Kerygma and Myth* was concerned to cleanse all biblical literature of pre-scientific myths without touching the mythical symbols which were embodied and expressed in the "Kerygma," nevertheless analyzed the various accounts of the resurrection, and acknowledged that the early records suggested that the resurrection was not a "public event" at all. He further concluded in his *Theology of the New Testament* that the Gospel accounts must be regarded as postscripts of the Crucifixion [this in accordance with Martin Kähler's suggestion in 1892 already]. This would suggest that the early church regarded the cross of Christ not as a defeat, but as a triumph in the Christian plan of salvation. (MaO 194)

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[15] "Wollen wir Gott schauen, so sollen wir uns zuerst sagen, daß wir ihn vielleicht nicht so schauen werden, wie wir uns ihn gedacht haben; so müssen wir uns darauf gefaßt machen, daß er vielleicht ganz anders aussieht als das Bild, das wir uns von ihm gemacht haben; so müssen wir bereit sein, seinen Anblick auch mit Schrecken entgegenzunehmen. Können wir ihn in der Gegenwart nicht schauen? Ist unser altes Gottesbild in Trümmer gegangen? So wollen wir zuerst dafür danken, daß wir den falschen Begriff verloren haben; denn nur so können wir ihn schauen, wie er wirklich ist" (R.Bultmann, "Vom geheimnisvollen und vom offenbaren Gott: Pfingstpredigt 1917. " Journal *Christliche Welt* 31 [1917]: 572-79; 574-5).

Bultmann and Niebuhr are both concerned with the meaning of the Biblical text for Christians today. Both agree that a genuine hermeneutical regard is not a defeat for Christians. Too much space and excessive thought have gone into debunking the theological position of each of them, thereby forgetting that faith is always imperiled on one side by despair and on the other side by optimism. "Of these two enemies of faith, optimism is the more dangerous. Few people live in permanent despair. They will construct some little cosmos in the seeming chaos of existence to give meaning to their life. The greater danger is let the cosmos, from which they derive their sense of meaning, be too tentative and tenuous to support the idea of meaning in the great crises of existence" (BeT 115). Optimism is dangerous because it is essentially the belief that the nation or the culture can use reason to lead life into the infinite, and for Marxism, the belief that it is the task of "one particular class to build a civilization which will be free of the evils by which all previous civilizations have destroyed themselves" (BeT 115). The Hebraic prophetic movement found its source in a meaning of human existence that not only transcended any possible chaos in history, but actually "predicted catastrophe as the inevitable consequence of man's sin against God" (BeT 118). For Niebuhr, Augustine's trust in human beings in *The City of God* is responsible for the Roman Catholic heresy of equating the Kingdom of God with the church. As he writes in "Augustine's Political Realism" (CRPP 120), "The definition of 'realists' and 'idealists' emphasize disposition, rather than doctrines; and they are therefore bound to be inexact. It must remain a matter of

opinion whether or not a man takes adequate account of all the various factors and forces in a social situation." And yet Augustine deserves to be called the first great 'realist' in Western history "because his picture of social reality in *Civitas dei* gives an adequate account of the social factions, tensions, and competitions which we know to be well-nigh universal on every level of community; while the classical age conceived the order and justice of its polis to be a comparatively simple achievement, which would be accomplished when reason had brought all subrational forces under its dominion." (CRPP 121)

Rahner has his own struggle with mythology and demythologization. To use Niebuhr's own understanding, mythology has an imaginative grasp that includes both poet and scientist. Science, even though it is a system of knowledge based on facts and answers, has more questions than answers and the sum of all the questions seems to grow more quickly than the sum of the answers (InG 119). Also, these facts are perceived by the contemporary 'I' in a certain historical world-view, and this 'I' cannot wait for future scientific discoveries to unravel the answers to the questions of today, because the sum of the questions grows equally or at an even greater pace than the sum of the answers. Rahner reminds us that the

> world is not merely a world of facts, if only because facts are always given to us as known and therefore in perceptions and notions. The world in which we found ourselves placed as we began is a world of pieces of knowledge, opinions, conceptions, convictions and the norms and modes of behaviour resting upon them. It is a world already formed by [those] who went before us, so that we began with a world-view handed on to us. (TI 3, 385)

We need to be conscious of the history which has shaped the world in which we live.

This is a view Niebuhr reflects in his writings: present realities can be interpreted only through memory, because memory represents our capacity to rise above the temporal flux even while we are within it (more on this # 3.6.2). And time is within us as much as we are within time. "The most obvious definition of 'history' is that it is a record or memory of past events" (FaH 18). Historical consciousness is "the conviction that forms of cultural life, and so back of that the forms of human consciousness, are importantly different in different spaces and times, in different periods of history: culture and consciousness alike change as history changes" (ON 228). Rahner, as well, writes:

> Contemporary man, who consciously reflects upon and recognizes the fact that his own knowledge is subject to historical conditioning, and that it is impossible for him to achieve any completely adequate reflection upon the presuppositions of his own knowledge, can achieve a typical standpoint with regard to his own self in a way which was quite impossible in earlier times. He can realize more clearly that his views are in danger of being influenced by his own subjective inclinations the very moment they cease to be confronted with the convictions of society as a whole in an open and effectively maintained dialogue at a fundamental level. (TI 11, 80)

Most importantly, as Niebuhr writes in addressing intellectual pride and what Schleiermacher first had in mind when he wrote his systematic theology, nothing in history is absolute,[16] including the humanly formed concepts of the Absolute on which we hang so many details of the Divine. It is easy for us to get the impression "that theology is a mere interweaving of ideas which are, of their nature, incapable of any verification, which remain at the level of poetical concepts and can still be

[16] ON 229. For further discussion see L. Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), part 2, chapter 8.

upheld, at most, simply by pointing with a certain arbitrariness to those dark and subconscious levels in man which have not yet been illumined by the anthropological sciences and so, for the time being, are not yet really capable of being used in any constructive system of thought." (TI 11, 101-2)

1.3 Revelation

Central to Niebuhr's understanding of the doctrine of creation is that it is not itself a doctrine of revelation, but is basic for the doctrine of revelation. "The doctrine of creation preserves the transcendence and freedom of God without implying that the created world is evil because it is not God" (ND 1,133-34). Creation "relates the ground of existence to existence and is therefore mythical and not rational" (BeT 9). The Christian religion is tempted to insist that belief in an actual forming of the first man out of a lump of clay, or in an actual six-day creation (BeT 9). This is where it is necessary to emphasize the distinction between primitive or pre-scientific myth and permanent myth related to Adam as shaped out of a lump of clay, or to God breathing the breath of life into him. "But the idea of creation remains mythical even when the primitive myth is discarded. If the myth is completely rationalized the creator becomes the first cause" (TiM 120-l). The myth of creation, which paradoxically does neither identify God with the world nor separates God from the world, "offers the basis" for theologies in which God is conceived as both the ground and ultimate fulfillment of a meaningful world, as both the creator and the judge of historical existence (TiM 121). When the idea of the divine creation of the world is taken seriously although not literally, Niebuhr would say, it refers to "the limits of the

world's rationality and the inadequacy of any 'natural' causes as a sufficient explanation for the irrational givenness of things […] frequently corrupted into a theory of secondary causation on the natural level" (FaH 33). Myth points to the timeless in time, but it does not lift the temporal to the category of the eternal. "When the mythical method is applied to the description of human character, its paradoxes disclose precisely the same relationships in human personality which myth reveals, and more consistent philosophies obscure, in the nature of the universe." (InCE 83)

Niebuhr gives general revelation a positive role in daily human experience. The experience of God is not a separate experience; it is rather an "overtone implied in all experience" (ND 1,127). At the outermost reaches of our consciousness, we come into contact with God, for this is where God impinges on our consciousness. This impingement contains three elements: the first two – namely a sense of absolute dependence and a sense of obligation - are not sharply defined, while the third one - the longing for forgiveness - is not defined at all by Niebuhr, although he is aware of Schleiermacher's experience of "unqualified dependence."[17]

That which is revealed to us is revealed in history: "There is meaning in history, a relationship between purpose and value" (TRN 113) which is not annulled but enriched by being imbued with mystery. Myth "prevents the realm of meaning from being reduced too simply to rational intelligibility and thereby being given a false center of meaning in a relative or contingent historical force or end" (FaH 103).

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[17] For a good treatment of Schleiermacher's terminology, especially the notion of "absolute dependence", see Richard R. Niebuhr, *Schleiermacher on Christ and Religion: A New Introduction* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), 174-96.

The Christian revelation does not promise that the "fragmentary and contradictory aspects of life will be overcome" (TRN 115); in fact its promise is that these fragmentary aspects will not be overcome until we stand, as it were, "beyond history" (ND 2, 49-51). Revelation moves toward a climax through a history of confrontation between God and the people who follow God. However, this is not the history of a "broadening religious consciousness or [of] a more and more successful yearning or searching after God" (FaH 149). We now live in the "interim" period of history. (see ND 2, 49-51)

The finite world is not incapable, on account of its finiteness, of apprehending comprehensible revelations of the incomprehensible God. "The most important characteristic of a religion of revelation is this twofold emphasis upon the transcendence of God" and "God's intimate relation to the world" (ND 1:126). In this divine transcendence our spirit finds a home for freedom. Here it also "finds the limits of its freedom, the judgment which is spoken against it and, ultimately, mercy which makes such a judgment sufferable" (ND 1, 126-7). A religion of revelation is able to do justice to both human freedom and human finiteness and to understand the character of evil in people. A religion of revelation is grounded in the faith that God speaks to us from beyond the highest pinnacle of the human spirit[18] and that this voice of God will discover our highest reach of transcendence not only to be short of God's

[18] Augustin talks about "caput animae meae" – "the top of my soul" (Co 10, 7 [or 11], and he says (Co 7, 10): "[…] with you [God] to guide me, I entered into the innermost part of myself and was able to do this because you were my helper. I entered and saw with my soul's eye (such as it was) an unchangeable light shining above the eye of my soul and above my mind".

highest but involved in the dishonesty of claiming that it does ever reach God (ND 1, 203). History does not resolve the ambiguity of false absolutes and of any form of partial meanings. Christ discloses the ultimate mystery of life and history, but the eschatological symbols pertaining to it are carefully placed at the end of history, not in history.

It is important to keep in mind the idea of the self-disclosure of God in history for that which is called the Creation (which shows that God is the ground and fulfillment of the universe), the Fall (which affirms that sin is not a natural tendency to centre ourselves inordinately around one impulse or to make ourselves the centre of existence), the Atonement and Resurrection (which together are the centre of meaning of life and history) and the eschatological symbols (which show that Niebuhr has a vertical and not a horizontal view of history). Niebuhr discarded his vision of a period of original righteousness prior to the Fall by the time he wrote *The Nature and Destiny of Man* published in 1941 and 1943.

In Christian faith, the life and death of Christ are the revelation of God with particular reference to the unsolved problem of the relation of God's judgment to God's mercy, of divine wrath and divine forgiveness. Christian faith understands in the cross of Christ the assurance that judgment is not God's final word to humanity. At the same time, mercy is not something that wipes out good and evil in history and makes judgment meaningless. The many theologies about the Atonement and justification are efforts to explicate the ultimate mystery, the final revelation of God's wrath and mercy (ND 1, 142). For Niebuhr, "the same Christ who is accepted by faith

as the revelation of the character of God is also regarded as the human character" (ND 1, 146). Unveiled for us is the most distinctive content of special revelation: "It must be observed that, once this character of God is apprehended in terms of special revelation, common experience can validate it." (ND 1, 143)

Often, myth is layered in anthropomorphisms, which is cause for us to tread carefully. We all come to the Bible with presuppositions, and before we inquire into the nature of this collection of texts we are more or less aware of a host of witnesses past and present (KeM 148-50). For one, when we speak *of* God (not *about* God!) we are forced to speak *of* ourselves (not *about* ourselves!).[19] The general understanding of anthropomorphic language is to characterize God as having the same physical qualities as human beings: "a white beard, a strong right arm, everlasting arms, etc." (RSF 173, n.1). According to Niebuhr, when we employ metaphors or the terms 'like' or 'as,' we are still speaking of God in symbolic forms available to us. We use certain symbols because they have been handed down to us by biblical authors. This is a good reason to continue using them, but it does not mean we cannot avail ourselves of other symbols. We need not be frightened by certain writers and theologians who urge our imagination to construct new and equally formidable symbols for the Absolute, whom we reverently refer to as God.

1.4 Meaning and Faith

Niebuhr's starting point is that we can understand ourselves only from a

[19] R. Bultmann, "What Does It Mean to Speak of God?" In R. Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding* I. New York: Harper & Row, 1969, 53-65.

transcendent vantage. To understand oneself as creature means to begin with a faith that one is more than mere creature, to be capable of transcendence since one is *imago dei* (see # 1.1), to be known and loved by God and to find ourselves in terms of obedience to the divine will (ND 1, 15). All "religious affirmations are an expression of a sense of meaning and that a penumbra of mystery surrounds every realm of meaning. Religious affirmations avail themselves of symbols and myth, which express both trust in the meaning of life and an awareness of the mystery of the unknowable that surrounds every realm of meaning." (CaC 1966, 127)

When searching for the proper way to expound meaning and for what type of meaning Niebuhr is striving, we must ask where is the centre of meaning for both individual and collective life (FaH 56). It is because the "answer to this question is so difficult and it extends the bounds of meaning from the confines of the simple intelligibility to the realm of mystery that both classical and modern naturalism have sought to confine the meaning of human existence rigorously to the realm of nature" (FaH 56). We are creatures involved in the flux of time and in the vicissitudes of history. Yet we are also makers of history and to some extent transcend history sufficiently to be able to develop rational structures of meaning for both individual and collective life. We must find something beyond nature, time and history to apprehend the centre of meaning for ourselves. This centre can be apprehended by faith which is a necessary corollary of the preservation of the unity of humans in their finiteness and freedom, and of the unity and meaningfulness of history "despite its ambiguity, as more than natural and less than purely rational" (FaH 57). According to

the Christian faith, life is and will remain fragmentary; there are no simple congruities in history.[20] Niebuhr begins his Gifford Lectures held in 1939 by stating that we are our own most vexing problem (ND 1, 1). Towards the apex of the first volume, he writes:

> Implicit in the human situation of freedom and in man's capacity to transcend himself and his world is his inability to construct a world of meaning without finding a source and key to the structure of meaning which transcends the world beyond his own capacity to transcend it. The problem of meaning, which is the basic problem of religion, transcends the ordinary rational problem of tracing the relation of things to each other as the freedom of man's spirit transcends his rational faculties. (ND 1, 164)

Rahner follows on this line of thought when he says that a person

> is always asked whether in fact he really wants to overcome or to lessen in an upward direction the difference which belongs to his essence between what he is and what he can and should be. He is always asked whether he ultimately wants to absolutize a particular inner-worldly value in a godless ideology and make an idol of it, so much so that he makes it his absolute (perhaps not in the theory of his moral views, but in practice), and he is asked whether or not he wants to construct his whole existence upon this finitude and yet absolute point." (FCF 409)

It has been brought to our attention by many Niebuhr scholars that he begins with ethics, that is with how people react to particular situations given the example set by Christ, which he calls the "impossible ideal" toward which we constantly strive. In this way it has been found proper to say that Niebuhr is ethically controlled by the example set for us by Jesus. Paul Lehmann argues for a mythological Christology, which leads Niebuhr interpreters to believe that Christ is the centre of his theology (more on this # 3.7). Another way to show that Niebuhr begins with people

[20] R. Niebuhr, "We Have This Treasure in Earthen Vessels." *ChSo* 14/4 (Fall 1949): 3.

and in effect stays there is his disdain for Karl Barth's somewhat curious reverse analogy of personality which attributes anthropomorphic characteristics to God. Niebuhr may have agreed with this formula, but Barth's model of the total transcendence of God as Wholly Other forgets all too easily that theology is done in light of anthropology. This is in line with Rahner's assertion that humans can find rest only in the second person of the Trinity (TI 4, 119-20). Faith, while it involves belief, does not mean only belief for Niebuhr. It is more a trust that there is meaning in human existence. The content of that meaning is perceived through Christ.

> The Christian faith begins with, and is founded upon, the affirmation that the life, death, and resurrection of Christ represents an event in history .[…] The interpretation of history in the light of this event creates a structure of meaning in which the history of a particular nation, as the center of the whole of history, is unequivocally transcended. […] the clue to meaning of the drama is in the whole series of revelatory events. 'God's mighty acts,' culminating in the climax of revelation in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. In these mighty acts the mysterious design of the sovereignty which controls historical destiny is clarified. The interpretation of history from the standpoint of this revelation leads to a full understanding of the reality of evil. Evil is a force within history itself and not an intrusion of the necessities of nature into the historical. The drama of history contains a subordinate conflict between good and evil forces in history. Ultimately the drama consists of God's contest with all men, who are all inclined to defy God because they all tend to make their own life the center of history's meaning. (FaH 26-27)

1.5 Ambiguities in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*

Before underscoring the place of meaning in Niebuhr's thought, it is necessary to look at something which gives more substance to this idea. *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), Niebuhr's first major work, created diverse reactions especially since Niebuhr, an exponent of liberal Christianity, sounded conservative in his estimation of human nature. A critique of the way the social gospelers went about

trying to save and transform civilization, this book was not a rejection of the Social Gospel project (MLT 454). One problem Niebuhr created for himself was already expressed in the title – namely the idea of individuals being moral and groups being immoral, for which he was soundly criticized by none other than his own brother. In 1965, he reframed the title, with some assistance, to read: *The Not So Moral Man in His Less Moral Communities.*[21] Three important, and yet often overlooked, theses are contained in this volume: the ambiguity of power, the ambiguity of reason, and the ambiguity of religion.

1.5.1 The Ambiguity of Power

Political existence represents a conflict of wills driven by the interests of different groups, be it class or nation. Political life is not primarily a clash of theories to be carried on and directed by theoretical minds; nor is it one resolved by some mode of rational adjudication, persuasion, or agreement. The interests that drive and dominate groups are those of self-concern for the power, security, and status of the group; these interests are stubborn and resourceful. They will allow themselves neither to be persuaded nor deflected; they cannot be checked, limited, or overthrown except by the opposition of another and stronger group. (ON 33-34)

This interest, this will-to-power, is the major impediment to the achievement of justice. The impediment is not the result of a lack of education or of a misunderstood pedagogy that perpetuates structures encouraging oppression.

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[21] MaNC 22. - See also R. Niebuhr (under the pseudonym St. Hereticus) in CaC 46/1 (Feb. 3, 1986): 23.

The interests of the powerful and dominant groups who profit from the present system of society "are the real hindrance to the establishment of a rational and just society" (MMIS 213). This and not just a defective intellect is what dominates the corruption of society, and it is "stupid" to try to reverse the brutal character of human groups and coerce them to moral suasion (SiS 92). Any significant social power engenders social inequality, and an increasing inequality in power creates social discontent. In the end unequal power and unequal privilege destroy one another. Power is necessary for order and harmony because any community entails subordinate and decentralized units eager to dominate each other, which makes it hard to understand the requirement for an equal importance of larger interests. Niebuhr is appealing to the need for balanced power in which there is the least possible corruption. Absolute power in human groups, if such a thing can be had, leads to a difficult lifestyle for those supplying each privileged group with power. Hence the paradox: "the power necessary to control the wicked is the danger, not the wicked" (ON 35). Order and justice will always be corrupted to greater and lesser degrees by the ruling minority who, though it has a commission to represent everyone equally, also has goals and interests which can only be sustained by meeting certain objectives and disallowing some people from being equally represented.

1.5.2 The Ambiguity of Reason

Niebuhr sees reason as the principle of creativity in human life. For him, reason "is the principle by which humans transcend their own partial interests to achieve a more universal viewpoint" (ON 35). Reason is also the principle by which

we defend ourselves from accusations that we have partial and selfish interests, and it is used by the powerful and dominant groups to justify their privilege and power. "The will-to-power uses reason as kings use courtiers and chaplains, to add grace to their enterprise. Even the most rational men are never quite rational when their own interests are at stake." (MMIS 44)

The ambiguity of reason lends credence to the tenuous and fleeting privilege of place. This is probably why Niebuhr invests so much in the Biblical idea of faith. Rather than a simple ideal of perfection within history, faith involves belief and yet much more than belief, namely a state of trust that there is meaning in human existence and in one's own existence. (FSM 127; PtP 223)

1.5.3 The Ambiguity of Religion

"Religion is at one and the same time, humility before the absolute and self-assertion in terms of the absolute" (MMIS 64). Even when the religious sense of the absolute expresses itself in the subjection of the individual will to the divine will, "it may still offer perils to social and moral life" because even if we identify good and evil by this contrast, "all lesser contrasts on the human and historic level are obscured" (MMIS 66-67). Niebuhr's passion was the attempt to distill a proper meaning to life. It was more than just the promotion of pluralism he understood as corrective including the right of the non-believer to convince the believer when faith is not giving sway to justice. Pluralism also includes the right and duty of the empirical and historical disciplines to subject religious symbols to scrutiny and criticism" (MaNC 27). Without this latter development religious traditions often

degenerate from an obscurantist degradation of faith as "basic trust" to faith as "belief in propositions which may be historically dubious." (MaNC 27)

Secularism also balances the absurd absolutes conjured by some religious groups who feel that a free reign will reach too far afield from their area of influence. The Christian community must not become a ghetto; it must be one of brothers and sisters who know and love one another, a community that coheres, that creates the kind of environment necessary for common convictions, common aims, mutual help and mutual love, an environment in which Christian faith can develop without restriction and can exploit all the possibilities so as to become a vital force. In other words the Christian community, as Rahner reminds, "must not be a fire that warms only itself" (TI 7, 95); it must be open to influences from the outside. The trouble with secularism running amuck could lead to exactly the same problems in the opposite extreme. For Niebuhr, "the final vulgarity is to equate the ultimate ends of life with creature comforts" (NPl 45). Rather, "the hope that fragmentary portions of the truth can be pieced together in order to form the whole truth, or the belief that intellectual intercourse is a kind of competition in which the truth will finally prevail against falsehood, are admirable provisional incentives to tolerance" (ND 2, 237). The difficulty with this solution is that it is "a provisional and not a final answer to the question of the relation of the 'whole truth' to the fragmentary truths of history" (ND 2, 237). No one may claim ownership of the truth, for it remains subject to the paradox of grace. "Our toleration of truths opposed to those which we confess is an expression of the spirit of forgiveness in the realm of culture." (ND 2, 243)

The human problem is "humanity itself – our moralism and pride – our insistence on thinking more highly of ourselves, more highly of our intelligence, of our achievements, morality, and ideals, than we should" (MLT 536). We notice this by realizing the compounding ambiguity of power, reason, and religion: each can be used to keep the powerful securely in place. This compounding ambiguity is not mere description; it is an affirmation of power. However, when more interpretations become involved in the political and religious fields and are given equality, new and different groups are given thought. Christian salvation is not about giving every identity group its day at the podium; it is about "deliverance from egocentrism, moralism, and self-righteousness." (MLT 536)

1.6 Niebuhr's Sense of Meaning

The issue of meaning appears first in *Reflections on the End of an Era* (1934) "as the category most relevant to the understanding of history and of human action in history" (ON 53). Mythology also combines the exact data of the scientist with the vision of the artist and thus adds religious depth to this understanding. Both science and religion are in this way salvaged from becoming precisely what they should not be - namely disciplines which try to answer each other's questions, easily falling into the firm conviction that we know more than we think about others and the world in general, which brings about an absurd and corrupt epistemology that "lacks a vision of the whole which would give meaning to specific events it seeks to comprehend. A vision of the whole is possible only if it is assumed that human history has meaning; and modern empiricism is afraid of that assumption" (REnE 122-3). The same

language is used in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) when Niebuhr writes that

> religion is a sense of the absolute. When, as is usually the case, the absolute is imaged in terms of man's own highest ethical aspirations, a perspective is created from which all moral achievements are judged to be inadequate. Viewed from the relative perspectives of the historic scene, there is no human action which cannot be justified in terms of some historic purpose or approved in comparison with some less virtuous action […] and human vice and error may thus be clothed by religion in garments of divine magnificence and given the prestige of the absolute. (MMIS 52)

One may suspect here an echo of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) that Christ is no more than a super-reflex of humans and that Niebuhr is dealing out the same sort of ethical superiority. The latter is true, but Niebuhr is aiming his critique at particular thinkers in the Social Gospel movement – namely Shailer Mathews (1863-1941), Francis G. Peabody (1847-1936), and also – although in a lesser and more complex criticism, Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918).

The relevance of meaning for ethics and for theology is only implicit in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, for instance when Niebuhr writes that "the religious sense of the absolute expresses itself […] in the subjection of the individual will to the divine will, and in the judgment upon the will from the divine perspective" (MMIS 66). Niebuhr understands meaning as the basic issue of religion which "transcends the ordinary rational problem of tracing the relation of things to each other as the freedom of man's spirit transcends his rational faculties" (ND 1, 164). It is precisely because we transcend ourselves that we cannot solve this problem with a principle that does not transcend the world of meaning. We often wish to, but we must avoid using

subordinate principles of meaning, for this leads into idolatry: in such a scenario either the world of meaning used as an interpretive key is organized around a natural or historical vitality, or a subordinate principle of coherence is regarded as the ultimate principle of meaning. Arthur Murphy writes that Niebuhr believes rationalism is an inadequate system of meaning (in ReLR 19). Niebuhr does not have a high view of reason, though when understood correctly reason does have relevance for him. He prefers the depth of symbolism because symbols are the bearers of "the mystery of human existence" (MaNC 27). Finite principles cannot be used as an adequate device for discovering that which transcends our own self-transcendence. "The real situation is that man who is made in the image of God is unable, precisely because of those qualities in him which are designated as 'image of God,' to be satisfied with a god who is made in man's image." (ND 1, 166)

Both progress and science have discredited "the significance of the realm of mystery which stands at both the beginning and end of [our] effort to comprehend the coherences and sequences of [our] world rationally" (FaH 51). The idea of progress has invalidated faith and any meaning of life faith discerns. Science seeks prematurely to chart the scientifically observable structures and coherences of nature and give them a simple rational answer.

> The ultimate question raised by the facts of freedom and necessity in history is how human freedom is related to the patterns and structures of historical existence. If human freedom were absolute, human actions would create a realm of confusion . […] The uniqueness of human freedom makes it impossible to regard the structures and sequences of pure nature as the basis of the pattern of meaning for life. (FaH 56)

Where then is the center of meaning? Human beings do transcend nature, time, and history sufficiently enough to develop rational structures of meaning for their own individual and collective life; but they are involved in the flux of time and history, and therefore they cannot claim that nature is a proper measure of meaning. That which can be called the center of meaning must be for Niebuhr *ultimately* transcendent, and human beings are *absolutely* transcendent. To use the words of Rahner, "in respect of God," human beings are more than creatures and yet less than ultimate (TI 9, 28). We cannot be the center of meaning, which can be apprehended only by faith. According to Niebuhr, this wisdom is expressed also in totemism or tribalism which "seeks to relate a flux of tribal life to a more absolute center of meaning beyond itself" (FaH 57). Meaning, for Rahner, is found in the most practical matters. God's self-communication is a historical moment in God's salvific activity in the world, and the most important element of this self-communication is of the world, born of a woman, since an incomprehensible mystery cannot be our rest (even though we are mysteries to ourselves), but only the logos become a human being. (FCF 195; TI 4, 120)

According to Lehmann, Niebuhr in his early writings moves from *Christus in nobis* to *Christus pro nobis*, but he does the reverse in his mature thought. He suggests that Niebuhr is simply moving from the theological semantics of liberalism's "religion of Jesus" and a stress on the '*in* nobis' which has almost nothing to do with Christology until 1937 (KeB 256-7), to the concern for the relevance of Christianity "stated less and less with reference to the human situation to which the Christian faith

is relevant and more and more with reference to the truth of the Christian faith by which the human situation is illumined and resolved" (KeB 265). Thus, Lehmann rightly acknowledges that one constant in Niebuhr's thought is Jesus Christ. He also reminds us that it is easy to conclude that Niebuhr's thought moves in principle from reason to faith, from history to gospel, from anthropology to Christology, and all the more easy to forget that he is thinking mythically, although exactly the contrary is the case. (KeB 270)

When we observe and interpret historical events with as much honesty and integrity as possible and try to reduce conscious and unconscious ideological taints in historical observations, we see the necessity for a scheme of meaning "which is not the consequence but the presupposition of the empirical scrutiny of historical data. The more the whole panorama of history is brought into view, the more obvious it becomes that the meaning" (FaH 118) given to the whole comes from faith. History is given meaning by some kind of religious faith in the sense that the concept of meaning "is derived from ultimate presuppositions about the character of time and eternity" (FaH 118). These presuppositions may not satisfy the requirement for creating an adequate framework for the correlation of all relevant historical facts and may still lend themselves to a premature and idolatrous centre of meaning (ND l, 165). Such premature meanings cannot be accepted as the centre of meaning, and it becomes "apparent that the real centre of meaning must transcend the flux of time." (FaH 119)

Every larger frame of meaning, Niebuhr explains, which correlates historical

events into a pattern,

> is a structure of faith rather than of science, in the sense that the scientific procedures must presuppose the framework and it cannot be merely their consequence. The difference between structures of meaning is therefore not between supposedly 'rational' and supposedly 'irrational' ones. Supposedly rational frames of meaning may be irrational in the sense that an implicit and unacknowledged center and source of meaning may be inadequate to do justice to every dimension of human existence and every perplexity and antinomy in the stuff of history. (FaH 119)

A supposedly "irrational" frame of meaning may also be rational in the sense that it acknowledges a center and source of meaning beyond the limits of rational intelligibility and partly because it rationally senses the inadequacy of the idolatrous character of centers and sources of meaning which are within the limits of rational intelligibility (FaH 119). There are no simple congruities in life and history. "It is possible to soften the incongruities of life endlessly by the scientific conquest of nature's caprices, and the social and political triumph over historic injustice. But all such strategies cannot finally overcome the fragmentary character of human existence. The final wisdom of life requires not the annulment of incongruity but the achievement of serenity within and above it." (IAH 62-63)

In the New Testament we learn that it is not in humanity but in the Cross that history achieves both its end and a new beginning. The affirmation that Christ is the end of history signifies that in his life, death, and resurrection the meaning of humanity's historical existence is fulfilled (FaH 139). "The problem of the meaning of history is always the problem of the meaning of life itself" (FaH 140). The messianic age is not just a culmination of the historical process; it is the result of

divine intervention in which "the 'eschaton' is realized, the meaning of life and history is revealed. […] The Christian revelation does not promise that the fragmentary and contradictory aspects of life will be overcome, history remains ambiguous to the end." (TRN 115)

For a person with a contrite recognition of the human situation of sinfulness and the need for repentance, the completion of meaning is possible through revelation of the wisdom and power of God. Only the acceptance of this revelation can make sense out of life, "whereas alternative approaches either destroy the sense of life entirely or make false sense out of it" (FaH 141; cf. ND 2, 107-26). There is an absurdity and an ultimate wisdom of faith in Christ as the end of history and as the fulfillment of life's meaning. This paradox is a cornerstone of the relationship between history and the disclosure of God within history.

It is important that we grasp the form and the content of this revelation which brings complete meaning to history. The form is a story or an event in history by which the apprehension of faith becomes something more than a mere event in history; it is an event which apprehends the whole of history and reveals the divine sovereignty over it (FaH 141). In the form of the story the meaning of history is completed. The story is "not presented as a theophany, revealing the meaning of the eternal word to finite man; nor yet merely as the story of a 'God-man' who overcame the breach between the eternal and the temporal or the divine and the temporal. On the contrary it is a part of history, though the claim is made that in it history has found its true fulfillment." (FaH 145)

The specific content of this revelation involves the crucifixion of the Messiah, and it is in this drama that all forms of human righteousness are made problematic. The form and content of the drama make it necessary for a person to grasp this drama in his or her total personality and not merely by reason. Ironically, Christ was not crucified by criminals or people who were below the ordinary standards of human virtue; such criminals were crucified with Christ. Life is not as consistent as we would wish (IAH 62). Biblical faith begins with a sense of mystery which embodies meaning, it "moves to a sense of meaning in history which contains perplexity and ambiguity, ends by seeing human history perpetually, and on every level of its achievements, in contradiction to the divine." (FH 144)

1.7 Partial Fulfillments, Incomplete Meanings and the Problem of Truth

For Niebuhr, a healthy culture is driven by competing approaches to truth instead of relying for its basis on general agreement about what truth is. Using the word 'truth' is a most unreliable way to express ultimacy. It has become widely accepted that there are as many truths as there are holy texts, and surely more. There is also the fact that science claims its own sphere of truth. As H. Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962) suggests, "the Christian movement helps us to tolerate, understand and love those who express another phase of the Christian movement than our own group expresses; it warns us of our own limitations, yet encourages us to do our own work with all our might and to seek unity not on the level of hazy sentimentalism but of active and moral conflict of those who can contend fruitfully because they share a common faith" (KiG 1988, xxvi). In a 1982 lecture Rahner usefully compares the

usage of the words '*truth*' and '*meaning*'[22] and explains that the word 'truth' has not disappeared, although it has been misunderstood by some brands of Christianity who believe they own the truth, while it might be better to say that they promote their own ideology, i.e. a cultural or particularistic version of the truth. It is important, then, that Rahner equates absolute truth and absolute meaning (TI 11, 111) with God as the incomprehensible mystery (TI 7, 62) into which all other mysteries must be reduced. (see introd. n.7)

The "freedom of the human spirit over the flux of nature and history makes it impossible to accept our truth as the truth" (ND 2, 214). Knowledge of the truth invariably reveals the ideological taint of interest, which makes our apprehension of truth something less than truth itself. When speaking of meaning, it is no secret or sleight of hand that causes knowledge of truth to become equivalent with truth. Thus, "the meaning of life always appears against a background of deep, even infinite mystery. […] A meaning in historical life is never demonstrable, either by science or by rational speculation. All are partial, perspectival, pictures at best of the meaning resident in the mystery of things, in short 'myths'" (ON 56). Rahner writes:

> There is no doubt that Scripture portrays the primeval state in mythological images and this portrayal extends right up to Pauline theology. And so it is difficult in these protological accounts to make a clear distinction between their real meaning and the mythological images in which this meaning is clothed. (Recourse to statements of the ecclesial teaching office is certainly a help, but it seems that this alone is not sufficient because in these very statements themselves, in a way that is sometimes simple and without

[22] TI 21, 196. – Lecture held at the Reinhold-Schneider Stiftung, Freiburg in Breisgau, on June 11, 1982. The lecture has hitherto appeared only in a publication of this Foundation; see *Reinhold-Schneider Stiftung* (1982 – No 20): 21-28, published in Hamburg.

> reflection, there are echoes of these mythological modes of speaking, or they are simply handed on). (TI 21, 46-47)

It is best we do realize the relativity of our knowledge of truth which subjects us to what Niebuhr calls the peril of skepticism. There is always a concomitant peril in scepticism if it leads us fall into the chasm of meaninglessness. A Buddhist may not understand it quite this way, but Niebuhr is searching for the meaning of life and history as it pertains to human existence, and he finds the cyclical nature of Buddhism to be no-history and meaningless. Rahner acknowledges that nowadays there is a great deal of talk about meaning rather than about the old word 'truth'. Even when truth is spoken of, it is sought in the "plural rather than an absolute truth […] and so people are more inclined to inquire after meaning in the singular" (TI 21, 196). The thought is not complete until we add that for Rahner absolute truth equals God. Rahner also challenges us with the idea that the church may seem to be just another social organization defending an ideology with a particular view of the world and existing in competition with other similar organizations and their views. However, "if we understand ourselves correctly and understands divine life, divine grace, and hence the genuine reality of the church, in the end the church transcends this pluralistic life with its competing groups" (FCF 400). In his 1964 talk "Ideology and Christianity"[23] Rahner counts Christianity among other fictitious world-views and ideologies, but he finally assesses that God's grace will always keep Christians from

[23] A talk to Catholic students of the University of Erlangen on 15 July 1964, published in *Concilium* 1 (1965): 475-83 (German edition), and in the English edition of *Concilium* 1 (June 1965): 23-31; see also TI 6, 43-58.

making themselves into the absolute. (TI 6, 58)

To deny the limited character of our knowledge and the finiteness of our perspective, or to pretend we have achieved a degree of knowledge which is beyond the limit of finite life, this is for Niebuhr the "'ideological taint' in which all human knowledge is involved and which is always something more than mere human ignorance" (ND 1, 182): it is intellectual pride.[24] Great thinkers and weak thinkers alike pose as the final thinkers: "Intellectual pride is thus the pride of reason which forgets that it is involved in a temporal process and imagines itself in complete transcendence over history." (ND 1, 195)

Sometimes the root of insecurity in intellectual pride is revealed by the pretence of an individual who hides the insecurity of an entire class or age. For instance, "Descartes' intellectual pride was something more than the ignorance of his ignorance. That was disclosed when he resented the reminder of a friend that his '*Cogito, ergo sum*,' the keystone of his philosophical arch, was derived from Augustinian thought" (ND 1, 196). Interestingly, Etienne Gilson (1884-1978) displays how near to each other Descartes and Augustine were in this respect. Descartes' principle is "I think, therefore I am" and in light of God, who Descartes portrays as a powerful and cunning deceiver, "I exist, also if he deceives me, and let him deceive me as much as he will, he can never cause me to be nothing so long as I

[24] One of Niebuhr's most intriguing aspects of pride is intellectual pride which correlates with the "ideological" taint and includes sensuality. More than the complete opposite of pride, sensuality is the entirety of pride: losing oneself in another or in some vital entity is as much self-glorification as it is self-effacement. Niebuhr deals with this issue not in ND 1, but in ND 2, 304.

think I am something."[25] Can this be said in light of Descartes' dictum to doubt everything possible—even the goodness of God? In fact, if we understand Descartes at all he did believe God created the universe on whose power everything depends, and this does not sound like an evil deceiver.

Augustine does not argue for a cunning God who plots to deceive us; for him, to exist is to be able to be deceived. Rahner takes this further by arguing that we are both the deceived and the deceivers, and that we mostly deceive ourselves about the essence of God.[26] As to Hegel, Niebuhr says he "proclaimed the finality of his own thought but regarded his contemporary Prussian military state as the culmination of human history" (ND 1, 196). He further claims that "Auguste Comte believed his philosophy to be final not only as a philosophy but as a religion; and with pathetic national pride he predicted that Paris would be the centre of the new universal culture" (ND 1, 196). Marxism was able to discover intellectual pride in other cultures but overlooked the same pretension among its own members. Niebuhr and Rahner share similar ideas with regard to ideology and especially Marxism since they were both in close and friendly proximity to Marxists (Vorgrimler 1986, 112-4). Niebuhr first used Marxism as a solution to many of Christianity's shortcomings, but later in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) he saw Marxism not as a solution, but rather as a hindrance to the expression of prophetic Christianity since it could not

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[25] E. Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), 155-59; 156.
[26] "*Zwei paradoxe Worte"*. In K. Rahner, *Biblische Predigten* (Freiburg im Bresgau: Herder, 1965), 202-6.

grasp the flaws in its own system. Those who rise from oppression, if they gain enough power, inevitably will become oppressors of the ones who oppressed them and worse others who do not subscribe to their ideology.

Niebuhr saw us as free spirits transcending every situation with concern for unconditioned truth, and as invariably tempted to claim absolute validity for their partial perspectives. Immersed in the contingencies and necessities of nature we cannot always make the difference between our truth and absolute truth. Because we are contingent creatures who believe, for the most part, in one certain truth which in essence is a particular or historical truth but not the truth, we call this the answer to meaning in our lives. If we were wholly transcendent, we would not be tempted to insert the necessities of the moment and the vagaries of the hour into truth and thus corrupt it (TI 9, 28). We would not be urged to deny the finiteness of our knowledge, we would not become anxious. We may also see the indictment: "Be not anxious!" as the focus of Niebuhr's mystagogy since he continually urges religious and political audiences not to be anxious. The "denial of the finiteness of our knowledge and the false claim of finality is always partly the ignorance of our ignorance" (ND 2, 215). It is a failure of our capacity for self-transcendence which derives from being *imago Dei.* The claim to finality of thought is "always a partly conscious or semi-conscious effort to obscure the partial and interested character of our knowledge of the truth." (ND 2, 215)

Being our own most vexing question, we ask whether life is worth living. The very character of the question reveals that the questioner must in some sense be able

to stand outside of it and transcend what is being asked. When we create religions and evaluate philosophies we show our ability for self-transcendence. Whenever we consider our own self-negation or a lifeless eternity as the only possible end of life we show that we not only make history, but also transcend it (ND 1, 1-2). Wisdom about our destiny is dependent on recognizing the limits of our knowledge and power. Our most reliable understanding is the fruit of "grace:" faith completes our ignorance without pretending to possess certainties. (ND 2, 321)

Faith in the transcendent God as revealed in personal experience and in the whole creation is for Niebuhr the ground on which Biblical historical revelation is built up. This revelation is concerned with God's judgment and God's mercy. Historical revelation is not, in and of itself, the answer to the quest for meaning or for God; these are interpretations to which liberal theology has often reduced Biblical revelation. It is rather the historical record of those events in which faith discerns the self-disclosure of God. (ND 1,136)

Niebuhr understands the meaning of life with reference to history. Those who include history in the realm of meaning see it as a process which moves toward a fuller disclosure and realization of life's essential meaning (ND 2, 2). In religions in which history is contributing to the meaning of life "the attitude toward our partial involvement in, and partial transcendence over, the process of nature and the flux of time" (ND 2, 3) does not view ambiguity as an evil from which we must be redeemed. A basic distinction between historical and non-historical religions is that the former expect a Christ while the latter don't. To assert that the Cross is the

wisdom of God is to say that "the final mystery of the divine power which bears history is clarified; and, with that clarification life and history are given their true meaning. […] The wisdom apprehended in Christ clarifies the character of God" (ND 2, 55). God has a resource of mercy beyond his law and judgment: "[…] in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ the expected establishment of God's sovereignty had occurred; and in this disclosure of the power and will, life and history found their previously partly hidden and partly revealed meaning, though it is not denied that God remains, despite this revelation, partly *Deus Absconditus.*" (ND 2, 35)

God's self-disclosure is understood by Christian faith as God's final word to humankind. "The revelation of the Atonement is precisely a 'final' word because it discloses a transcendent divine mercy which represents the 'freedom' of God in quintessential terms" (ND 2, 67). When this word of revelation is spoken it completes knowledge and clarifies the obscurities and contradictions in history. "In that sense history is made meaningful but its meaning is threatened by meaninglessness. Finally the 'word' of God corrects falsifications which have been introduced into the human interpretation of life's meaning" (ND 2, 67) out of the fact that we constantly desire to place ourselves at the centre of existence. Amidst such clarification we need to remember that Christ does not annul the incoherences of history and does not establish the triumph of the righteous over the unrighteous. In history, the perfect love which the Messiah's life and death exemplified is defeated rather than triumphant. "Thus, according to the Christian belief, history remains morally ambiguous to the end. The perfect love of Christ is both the ultimate possibility of all historic virtues

and a contradiction to them. Justice remains imperfect unless it culminates in this perfect love of self-giving" (FaH 135); every form of human justice remains in contradiction to perfect love. Love of neighbor - which for Rahner incorporates, but is not equal to, love of God - is for Paul the fulfillment of the law (Rm 10: 4), and it comprehends for the Johannine tradition the totality of Christian existence. (1 Jn 4:12)

Rahner's concept of meaning also revolves around Jesus Christ as the salvation of human beings, and Rahner carefully notes in much the same way as Niebuhr that meaning can be partial (TI 6, 4). A Christian answer to the question of the total meaning of human existence must be constantly sought for. Ceasing the search once we have found a given number of partial meanings within history would lead merely to a particular fulfillment of meaning. (TI 21, 208)

Mystery does not obscure "but enriches the meaning experienced by the free self. Our days are set in the 'interim' between the disclosure of that meaning and 'the day' when we shall know even as we are known" (TRN 114 & 1 Co 13: 12). "The idea that history is an 'interim' between the first and the second coming of Christ has a meaning which illumines all the facts of human existence. History, after Christ's first coming, has the quality of partly knowing its true meaning. […] Nevertheless history continues to stand in real contradiction to its true meaning, so that pure love in history must remain suffering love." (ND 2, 51)

Niebuhr's interpretation of history is the result of a reflection on the Cross-event as the centre of the whole range of human experience. "The Cross is the central

vantage point; the Cross which is the final norm of human nature is not the norm of history because it is not fully contained in history" (ND 2, 51). Due to human freedom, in history good and evil increase and we are unable to live a perfect life. The Christian answer to this incoherence "between the humans and the divine will is the suffering mercy" (CRPP 202). This is the "light that shines in darkness" (Jn 1: 5). As Christians we "affirm that by this light we see meaning where there was only meaningless passing of time. But the meaning has a penumbra of mystery. We see, but we see through a glass darkly [1 Co 13: 12]. […] the meaning and the mystery penetrate each other" (TRN 75). "Biblical faith combines a sense of mystery with specific meaning. It asserts that the divine mystery of creation and of judgment sensed by the individual in the height of […] self-consciousness has been clarified by a specific historical drama; that in the life, death and resurrection of Christ we have the key to the mercy and love of God whom we have previously known as the power of creation and as the ultimate judge." (SeDH 224)

When looking for the answer to the question of meaning, religions which imagine that faith in any god is better than no faith do not understand the search for meaning from the proper perspective. The ultimate question is not whether life has meaning - this it must have or no one could live -, but the proper question to ask, Niebuhr poignantly notes, is "whether this meaning is tragic" (ChPP 213). Christian faith takes us *beyond* tragedy, but only *through* tragedy in the form of suffering innocence.

In the foreword to *The Religious Situation* (1968) Niebuhr briefly discusses

the theme of the religious situation in a secular age. In the wake of the triumphs of secularism, it may be possible to gain a clue to the survival of religious faith by referring to psychiatric analyses of basic trust in the meaning of human existence and of the human person's instinctive will to survive (TRS x). It is our desire and our nature to use both words – meaning and survival - in a customarily sense as pointing to a world without incongruity and ambiguity, because we often associate both with dualistic tendencies. "Human personality must finally come to terms with the incongruity of its own existence" (TRS x). We are the most incongruous of creatures because we are children of nature who can transcend nature and create history. "Historical sequences and coherence, however, cannot satisfy [our] search for meaning because [we have] a freedom which transcends history, as well as nature, though this freedom never completely frees [us] from either nature or history." (TRS x-xi)

The religious vision of an ultimate moral fulfillment as we find it "in both Jewish and Christian Messianic hopes is so pure that it seems irrelevant to the problems of human togetherness among individuals and collectives" (TRS xiv). Human nature reveals a universal impulse of self-concern which is more pronounced in collective than in individual behaviour. In a society that is becoming more secular religious devotees must realize "that to make discriminate judgments on competitive human striving" is becoming more dependent on "empirical knowledge of all contingent elements which must be considered in these judgments." (TRS xiv)

A faith that looks to an ultimate order beyond the incoherences and

incongruities is bound to be expressed in symbols and prescientific terms. It does not forget to include in history the tragic element, i.e. suffering innocence. Reinitz points out that Niebuhr integrated liberal politics with a conservative theology (1980, 88). Whether this terminology is accurate can be discussed, but there truly was a change in Niebuhr's outlook in the 1930's. *Reflections on the End of an Era* (1934) represents his final foray into full Marxism, and from *Beyond Tragedy* (1937) on one can safely say he had moved into a critical Marxist/critical liberal - and still liberal – genre: Niebuhr was, unlike his Continental contemporaries, a liberal who criticized utopian liberals including Social Gospel theologians who held on to idealism rather than to a sound doctrine of human nature. Reinitz also suggests that "tragic people act heroically; they knowingly accept the evil consequences of their actions for the sake of the good they accomplish" (1980, 20). As for the symbols we use, "the custodians of the ark of faith must not be too ashamed of these metaphors; but they must also not be too literalistic in defending their faith against all the empirical disciplines fortunately available in our pluralistic culture." (FSM 131)

The drama of history contains many facts and sequences. "But the frame of meaning in which these facts and sequences are discerned must be apprehended by faith because it touches the realm of mystery beyond rational comprehension. The ultimate question always remains whether the mystery is so absolute as to annul the meaning of the historical drama or whether there is a key of meaning in the mystery, 'a light that shineth in darkness' [Jn 1:5 & 8:12], which clarifies rather than annuls, all the strange and variegated dramas of human history." (SeDH 242)

CHAPTER TWO - MYSTERY

> Belief in divine creation points to a realm of meaning which is at once both the beginning and the end of any system of rational intelligibility. […] The idea of a source and end of life, too transcendent to the desires, capacities, and powers of human life to be either simply comprehended by the human mind or easily manipulated for human ends, represents the radical break of Biblical faith with the idolatrous tendencies in all human culture.
>
> (FaH 46 & 103)

Pointing to the relation between mystery and meaning, Niebuhr explains that God is not pure mystery, but is made known: God's "sovereignty over history is disclosed in specific events and acts which are revelatory of the meaning of the whole process. But these revelations of sovereignty presuppose the divine power over the whole created world; and in the Biblical idea of the world's creation by God the emphasis is upon mystery. It calls attention to a depth of reality where mystery impinges upon meaning" (FaH 46). Therefore, there remains mystery in God, and it seems that Niebuhr relates God's mystery rather to the idea of creation than to the fact of revelation in Jesus Christ.

For Rahner, God is the "knowing and loving, ineffable mystery" (TI 3, 392). Mystery is one of the notions on which Niebuhr and Rahner both agree and disagree. For example, Rahner uses a terminology Niebuhr never uses, such as the Whither of Transcendence or *reductio in mysterium*. (see intro. n.7)

2.1 The Search for Ultimate Meaning

Chapter one analyzed Niebuhr's thought regarding meaning and partial meanings. In chapter 12 of *The Self and the Drama of History*, freedom as the cause of religious inclination makes it impossible for us to consider idealistic or naturalistic rationalism as a

solution to the meaning of life (SeDH 61). Human beings sense a mystery and a meaning beyond their rational faculties, "and they surmise that the chain of causes, whether conceived in terms of efficient or final cause, […] points beyond itself to a mystery of creativity" (SeDH 62). For all that, religious views do not have to exhibit a form of irrational faith. According to Niebuhr, where there is meaning, no doubt there needs to be a penumbra of mystery beyond rational intelligibility.

As Rahner said in 1941, a genuine philosophy of religion is a "fundamental-theological" anthropology insofar as human beings in their freedom and in their own history have to attend to a message from the free God" (HW 169). In 1966, Rahner recalled that theology is anthropology and anthropology is theology,[1] and in 1970, that the human being must be understood as the one who is "absolutely transcendent in respect of God," so that "'anthropocentricity' and 'theocentricity' are not opposites but strictly one and the same thing, seen from two sides" (TI 9, 28). This anthropological focus in theology is neither opposed to, nor does it detract from, a christological focus; rather, "anthropology and Christology mutually determine one another within Christian dogmatics" (TI 9, 28; also TI 13, 213-23). The incomprehensible God is made manifest in Jesus Christ, wherein we are able to find our rest (TI 4, 120). Thus,

> If we want to explain the question of meaning as a question of God, we presume the existence of such a universal and absolute question of meaning and the possibility of meaningful inquiry into such meaning, indeed that the very assertion that a question of meaning is really meaningful and not meaningless from the very outset already includes in itself the reality of such meaning. An assumption of this kind is of course not self-evident. (TI 21, 197)

[1] In a lecture delivered at the Theological Symposium of St Xavier's College, Chicago (USA) on 31 March 1966. First published in *Künftige Aufgaben der Theologie*, edited by P. Burke (Munich 1967), 31-60, and also as a contribution to *Wahrheit und Verkündigung: Michael Schmaus zum 70. Geburtstag*, edited by L. Scheffczyk, W. Dettloff, R. Heinzmann (Paderborn 1967, vol. II) 1389-1407.

According to Niebuhr, “The more explicit religions are, the more the self realizes a mystery in itself and in the world beyond the flux of observable causes. The self tries to overcome this threat to the meaning of its life by finding that the one mystery, the ultimate or divine mystery, is a key to the understanding of the self’s transcendent freedom” (SeDH 62). Like Niebuhr, Rahner sees God as ultimate meaning and as ultimate mystery. While there are important differences between the two thinkers, this study focuses more on the similarities. In Niebuhr also a search for meaning leads us into mystery. Rahner notes that there are three mysteries in the Christian faith, “no more and no fewer, and the three mysteries affirm the same thing: that God has imparted himself to us through Jesus Christ in his Spirit as he is in himself so that the inexpressible nameless mystery which reigns in us and over us should be in itself the immediate blessedness of the spirit which knows, and transforms itself into love” (TI 4, 272-3). These three mysteries are for Rahner Trinity, incarnation and grace, and they are subsumed or reduced into the incomprehensible God as the one and ultimate mystery.

With regard to what he calls ultimate mystery, Niebuhr distinguishes basically three possibilities or “categories”: “The first category embraces all religious responses in which the self seeks to break through a universal rational system in order to assert its significance ultimately” (SeDH 63). Until recently, this first category “was thought to be a phase of history which was overcome by the rise of the rigorously monotheistic religions and monotheistic philosophies” (SeDH 63). In this form of religion, the individual gives itself over in unconditioned commitment to the collective, “debases itself by this uncritical devotion”, and is robbed of freedom, since the collective, though more imposing and longer-lived than the individual, is also bound to nature and its necessities,

"so defective in organs of self-transcendence and therefore much farther removed from the ultimate source of meaning" (SeDH 63). Niebuhr held up this issue in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* already and developed it also with reference to individuals and groups, yet without the emphasis on the ambiguities of meaning he made later (see # 1.5).

A second "category" at the opposite pole to the first one is mysticism, which is a heroic effort "to transcend all finite values and systems of meaning, including the self as particular existence, and to arrive at universality and 'unconditioned' being" (SeDH 64). In the search for this type of being one cannot "be certain whether it is the fullness or the absence of being" (SeDH 64). Niebuhr finds no meaning in this sort of response to the ultimate mystery.

A third "category" is to be found in Judaism and Christianity. Both of these faiths "interpret the self's experience with the ultimate in the final reaches of its self-awareness as a dialogue with God" (SeDH 64). This response is different from the other two "categories" because such a dialogue must assume for God something these categories deem untenable, "but to which Biblical faith clings stubbornly" (SeDH 64), namely the fact that "Selfhood or personality cannot be attributed to God because the idea of personality has connotations of finiteness and casts a suspicion of 'anthropomorphism' upon Biblical faith" (SeDH 64). Niebuhr takes issue with Karl Barth's use of the analogy of personality for God (see # 1.4). Barth declares that God – not we - does own personality originally, and he states that "To be a person means to be subject, not merely in the logical sense but in the ethical sense: to be free subject, a subject which is free even in respect of the specific limitations connected with individuality, able to control its own existence and nature. If we consider what this implies, it will not occur to us to see in this

personalizing of the concept of God a case of anthropomorphism."[2] Niebuhr refutes Barth's position by saying that Barth has simply reversed the analogy of personality: he "has taken the […] concept of personality from human life and has applied it to the divine. From what other source could he have derived it?" (ND 2, 67n.16) For Niebuhr, Christianity enters history with the affirmation that "the drama of Christ's life is a final revelation, which clarifies the problem of relating the goodness of God's mercy and the severity of God's justice, by the assurance that God takes the demands of justice upon God's self through Christ's suffering love" (SeDH 66). Such a God is not made in our image; we are rather dissuaded from making images of God and invited instead to preserve the divine "mystery and incomprehensibility." (FaH 103)

To sum up, the drama of history "is not comprehended in the categories of meaning supplied by either the rationalists or the mystics." In the one case there is little room for the dramatic variety and the complex causal relations of history; in the other case, "the mystic conception of the fulfillment of meaning obviously results in the annulment of particular meaning in history." (SeDH 70-71)

The Biblical thesis requires a more explicit act of faith, because it leaps a gap of discontinuity, and more importantly, "it dares to give a specific meaning to the divine, which is relevant to the partial and fragmentary meaning of history" (SeDH 71). This act of faith pertains to the mystery of our whole cultural history and requires that a so-called dogmatic faith be validated by the experiences of the human self more than "the allegedly 'empirical' approaches to selfhood" (SeDH 72). Niebuhr's ultimate validation is found in experience, not in the faith as handed down by the fathers, because there are numerous

[2] K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics.* Eds G. W. Bromiley & T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975, vol. 1), 138.

schools of the faith handed down by the fathers, not one. Rahner illustrates this in the following remark regarding his teachers in 1969: they had a "fixed repertoire of '*questiones disputatae*', and if they disagreed about these they did so in a manner such that each of them knew why and in what respect they did disagree" (TI 11, 370). In 1978, Rahner notes the importance of experience for knowledge and reminds us that for the sciences as much as for religion experiences are based on a subjective evaluation: we order and categorize them in order to gain the results we wish. Everyone has one's own experiences, and only these. "But one wanted to arrive at something 'objective' about oneself through one's experiences. What does one really know about oneself if one's experiences are always limited, always 'arranged' by one's own freedom, which one cannot get hold of in knowledge?" (InG 117)

For Niebuhr, mystery is a pervasive and significant category primarily because he assumes God is active in life. "He sees a God who transcends all of our efforts to understand just as thoroughly as God transcends our creaturely being; yet this God is continually in essential and intimate relation to us" (ON 57). There are also points in "our ordinary experience where ultimate mystery as mystery impinges, as does God, and discloses its strange, shaking, and upholding presence" (ON 57). This "ultimate mystery as mystery" Gilkey talks about reflects Rahner's nameless being which we call mystery or *holy mystery.* "Every experience of transcendence is primary, non-derivative: and this same quality of the non-derivative, the non-deducible, holds good for that is met with it. For the transcendence and the content has nothing prior to itself. It is there in all other experiences as the condition of their possibility." (TI 4, 253)

"Christian Faith in the Modern World"[3] reveals Niebuhr's early thought on religion, science and mystery. Following close on *Does Civilization Need Religion?* (1927) and his autobiography of the Detroit pastorate, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (1929), this essay contains features of both. Niebuhr laments that religious world views are associated "too intimately with discredited cosmologies" and that it is not easy to convince people that religion is not identical with and "need not share the fate of prescientific world views". Religion "is more than an affirmation about the character of life and the universe" (CFMW 5). Religious feeling, importantly, creates within us a reaction to two mysteries, the mystery of the world and the mystery of the self. Primitive human beings have stood in awe of the forces of nature which they perceived as beyond their control and which nevertheless determined primitive humanity's destiny. Our slow awareness of the surroundings arises not so much in dealing with angst, terror and awe as experienced by primitive humans. The real terror is to be found in their growing consciousness of the thunder and lightning storms, of the constant floods, of the unexplained disease which calls forth the following questions: "why is this happening?" and "why is this happening to us?" (Coe 1981, 12-13) The mystery of the world concerns us only or chiefly as it relates itself to the mystery of selfhood. We experienced our physical surroundings and explained it in terms of the phenomena of conscious life even before we discovered our selfhood. This emerging selfhood, which follows from the "uniting of the mystery of the starry heavens above to the mystery of the moral law within" (CFMW 9), to talk as Kant does, is realized in a religious feeling which comes from not only solitary meditation but also from social life. "If religion cannot be made

[3] CFMW 5-22. – See also ReP (1930) and YRN.

vital enough to influence human relationships so that love will replace fear and contempt, social life cannot be purified in order to strengthen religious feeling." (CFMW10)

The Christian religion, Niebuhr explains, is expressed in two great affirmations: "1) that love is the ultimate principle of human relationships; 2) and that the high worth of human personality which justifies the principle of love is in turn justified and supported by the character of reality" (CFMW 12). No science can deny human consciousness. More than any other organism human beings are self-conscious and conscious of the world in which they live. In consciousness is the endless variety and uniqueness of humankind. (CFMW14-15)

According to Rahner, "In a situation in which it has come to be consciously recognized and reflected upon that every kind of knowledge, including theological knowledge, is subject to the vicissitudes and the conditioning process of history, the ecclesiological element in history is confronted both with greater threats than formerly and at the same time with fresh opportunities" (TI 11, 80). Contemporary human beings, in reflecting on their own unique experiences, realize more clearly now than ever before that they are in danger of subjective inclinations, but also that they are in a better position to understand that truth "actually has something to do with institutional life and practice" (TI 11, 80; see TI 21, 196). Rahner perceives that the notion of truth is displaced by the notion of meaning, "*to a certain extent*" (TI 21, 196 - italics added), and that nowadays people look for meaning rather than for comprehensive truth. (see # 1.7)

"Religion in its most irreducible form is the discovery and the appreciation of the harmonies of life and the universe" (CFMW 17). This assumption can never be made by science because it invariably discovers final coherence in nature, while prophetic religion

seeks for meaning to life beyond nature and the universe. “The Christian faith could not be maintained if science were completely hostile to any aspects of the universe which can support the affirmations of faith” (CFMW 20). For Niebuhr, the affirmations of faith are found mostly in the moral enterprise, they are supported by it and gain additional support from the poetic and intuitive approaches to life. As he readily admits, a skeptic may call this a “dynamic illusion” (CFMW 20). In this we have the early development of Niebuhr’s concept of mystagogy (more on this # 4) and a siding with Rahner that theology is first and foremost science of mystery. Niebuhr spent nearly every day of his life dealing with social politics and pondering social issues; he did not find simple answers in the offing, especially when dealing with religion as a response to the mystery of God. Mystery is a penumbra which surrounds and enriches meaning. For him, as for Rahner, it was not only possible but mandatory that a “lived faith be made present and articulated in such a way that this articulation is permanently revealed in Jesus Christ, even if a contemporary Christian’s insight into a particular aspect of faith is not equal to the insight that existed in the past.” (Weger 1980, 191)

For Niebuhr, science and religion are not as disparate as is often thought. Science tends a little too much toward rationalism; therefore it cannot contain the biblical symbols within its own conceptuality. But there is also the problem of making religion into bad science and of taking the biblical symbols literally (FaH 33; TiM 122; ReP 241-5). Both science and theology do suffer from pretending to know too much about something beyond their scope. Theological literalism corrupts the eschatological symbols of the Christian faith in which “the fulfillment of life is rightly presented, not as a negation but as a transfiguration of historical reality” (FaH 33). The paradox involved in

the Christian faith makes that "traditionalists maintain their faith because they are not sufficiently active intellectually to recognize its difficulties; the moral adventurers maintain [their faith] in spite of recognized difficulties because they have discovered a logic in life which negates any premature conclusions of purely analytical intelligence" (CFMW 22). Religion is justified "by morally potent and poetically vital life. Reason may support it but can never create the forces which express themselves in true religion." (CFMW 22)

2.2 Mystery and Meaning

For Niebuhr, "Biblical faith begins with a sense of mystery, embodying meaning, and moves to a sense of meaning in history which contains perplexity and ambiguity, ends by seeing human history perpetually, and on every level of its achievements, in contradiction to the divine" (FaH 144). However, "The testimonies of religious faith are confused more greatly by those who claim to know too much about the mystery of human life than by those who claim to know too little." (DST 152)

Those who "claim to know too much" may be divided into two groups, one religious and one irreligious. The latter solve "the problem of human existence and the mystery of the created world" by placing them into neat "systems of easily ascertainable meaning" (DST 152-3). It is repeated in both Niebuhr and Rahner that we experience only "partial elements of purposefulness and meaning" within history (see # 1.7). Though of course different contexts have afforded them a somewhat different language, their thought is surprisingly concerted. Rahner suggests that skeptics and agnostics say that a "total and definitive meaning of existence cannot be found. Life ultimately fades away

into a void; the question of and the demand for a definitive, all-embracing meaning of existence are meaningless from the very outset." (TI 21, 197)

The religious group claims that the whole of the created world points beyond itself to a mysterious ground of existence, to an enigmatic power beyond all discernible vitalities, to a first cause which precedes all known causes. They know too much about the eternal mystery, sometimes sharply defining the limits of reason and claiming to know "exactly how far reason penetrates into the eternal mystery, and how much further faith reaches." (DST 153)

A "genuine faith must move between those who claim to know too much about the natural world that it ceases to point to any mystery beyond itself and those who claim to know so much about the mystery of the 'unseen' world that all reverence for its secret and hidden character is dissipated" (DST 154). For Niebuhr, although a genuine faith "resolves the mystery of life by the mystery of God" (DST 154) and thus "discerns the meaning of existence," it "must not seek to define it too carefully" (DST 155-6), whereas Rahner, who knew the temptation of theology to answer all questions comprehensively, warned that a theology wishing to do this "is guaranteed to miss its proper 'object'" (KRD 216). Therefore he started his theology from an "essential and absolute, ultimately insuperable sense of helplessness" and only reached God when he perceived God as the absolute mystery. (KRD 216)

The new age of science attempted an even more rigorous denial of mystery. It traced the relations and causes which seemed to be at the root of various effects in every realm of coherence "and came to the conclusion that knowledge dissolved mystery. Mystery was simply the darkness of ignorance which the light of ignorance dispelled"

(DST 159). Science considered religion as based on a fear of the unknown which should be dissipated by further knowledge. It attempted to exactly define the penumbra of mystery in such a way that the natural, temporal, and material world would cease to point beyond themselves to ultimate mystery. Thus, the new age of science never grasped ultimate meaning. The natural sciences in Niebuhr's time, already as pluriform as theology and philosophy, were given to the ideological 'taint:' they believed to hold final answers when they were in actuality no higher a science than theology. Their findings therefore could not be held to be more absolute than theological findings produced also by a science, but searching for different answers (ND 1,194-7; TI 19, 219). Many different answers were being derived from manifold questioners. The glass was opaque, but the world was supposedly well understood despite the fact that "no natural cause is ever a complete and adequate explanation of the subsequent event." (DST 159)

Niebuhr and Rahner seem to have different concepts of mystery, but often there is similarity: "We are a mystery to ourselves in our weakness and our greatness; and this mystery can be resolved in part only as we reach into the height of the mysterious dimension of the eternal into which the pinnacle of our spiritual freedom seems to rise. The mystery of God resolves the mystery of the self into meaning" (DST 162). Rahner also explains that God remains the *insoluble* mystery, and human beings the *articulate* mystery of God. (TI 4, 116-7 & 120)

Our inclination toward evil - which Niebuhr summarizes in 1946 (DST) and elaborated much more in the Gifford Lectures in 1939 (published in ND 1 & 2 - 1941 & 1943) - is "primarily the inclination to inordinate self-love [that] runs counter to our

desires. We seem betrayed into it" (DST 163-4). Rahner situates such 'betrayal' in the following way:

> Anyone who simply takes social conditions for granted as good must as a Christian face the question whether he really thinks that man is a sinner, that there is a 'sin of the world,' that the world is seated in wickedness; he must ask whether his retreat to a private, inner world, where alone the drama is to be played between the redeeming God of freedom, love, and justice, and sinful humankind, does not corrupt Christianity and the unity of the living and historical person at least as much as the attempt to reduce Christianity to a purely humanitarian and social commitment. (Rahner 1974, 124)

According to Niebuhr, the anxiety stemming from the incapacity to achieve full meaning by ourselves may be expressed positively as creativity, or negatively as sinfulness. Being resourceful creatures armed with the guile of spirit, we seek to overcome anxiety and insecurity through the various instruments at our disposal. Inevitably, the security we seek for ourselves is bought at the price of the security of others, which is opposed to the way God created us, namely to love God and to be neighbors for others (Lc 10: 36-37). Our way of expressing love for God is not through a Gnostic-mystic ceremony, but by daily becoming neighbors in practical ways. And yet, conscious of the law of love we nevertheless make others the tool of our desire and the object of our ambition; we use our strength to hide our own weakness, and we fall into the evil of the lust for power and self-idolatry (DST 165; SeDH 42; TRN 85-88). In "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neigbour and the Love of God," [4] Rahner tries to avoid misunderstandings any discussion concerning "the love of God" and "the love of neighbour" (as he calls it) may entail. First, we must avoid reducing the love of God to just a commandment among others. The love of God cannot be relegated to one goal

[4] TI 16, 231-49. Draft of a lecture given at the general meeting of *Katholischer Fürsorgeverein für Mädchen, Frauen und Kinder* on 11 May 1965 in Cologne. Published in *Geist und Leben* 38 (1965): 168-85.

among a plurality of others; it is not so much the content of an individual commandment, as rather the basis and goal of all commandments. "Such love can take place only where God is loved […] and not as part of human self-assertion and self-fulfillment" (Marmion 1998, 81). Second, the love of others is not a test case for the love of God;" rather the relationship between both is one of "mutual conditioning" (Marmion 1998, 81). Third, this mutual conditioning is not to be understood as secular humanism, "whereby the love of God is perceived as an old fashioned word (ultimately dispensable) for the unselfish love of neighbour" (Marmion 1998, 81-82), 'neighbor' then being *wrongly* confused with an other person, which runs contrary to Lc 10: 36-37.

To sum up: Niebuhr summarizes his position concerning evil by saying that "Man's situation tempts to evil, provided man is unwilling to accept the peculiar weakness of his creaturely life and is unable to find the ultimate course and end of his existence beyond himself. It is man's unbelief and pride which tempts him to sin. And every such temptation presupposes a previous 'tempter' (of which the serpent is the symbol)" (DST 166). Paul Ricoeur (1915-2005) explains the situation in this way: "In the historical experience of man, every individual finds evil already there; nobody began it absolutely. […] Adam is not the first man, in the naïvely temporal sense of the word […]. Evil is part of the interhuman relationship, like language, tools, institutions; it is transmitted; it is tradition, and not only something that happens. There is thus an anteriority of evil to itself, as if evil were that which always precedes itself, that which each man finds and continues while beginning it, but beginning it in his turn."[5]

[5] P. Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 257-58. – For Bultmann and in the same way see Maurice Boutin, *Relationalität als Verstehensprinzip bei Rudolf Bultmann* ([Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie, 67]. Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1974), 299-305.

The "final mystery about human life concerns its incompleteness and the method of its completion. Here again modern culture has resolved all mystery into simple meaning" (DST 167). Modern culture believes that within the historical process all human desires will be fulfilled. Moderns believe that history, in and of itself, is redemptive. Even though there is war and injustice today, tomorrow will proffer an end to poverty and all injustice will surely be abolished. "Utopia is the simple answer which modern culture offers in various disguises to the problem of man's ultimate frustration. History is, according to the most characteristic thought of modern life, a process which gradually closes the hiatus between what man is and what he would be" (DST 168). Niebuhr here strikes out against the Social Gospel movement and its more utopian thinkers. William Lindsey, who understands the influence of the "neo-orthodox" critics who tended to exaggerate the shortcomings of the Social Gospel, notes at the same time that "theologians such as the Niebuhrs were children of the social gospel, and often acknowledged their indebtedness to their social gospel forbears" (Lindsey 1997, 19). Richard Dickinson underscored the similarities between Niebuhr and Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918): despite the streak of utopian thinking in him Rauschenbusch did acknowledge the reality of evil in the world.[6] Lindsey cannot claim the same likeness between Niebuhr and Shailer Mathews (1863-1941), who was too utopian for Niebuhr's sense of Christian Realism. (more on this # 3.5)

For Niebuhr, "There is no resolution of the problem of the individual in any collective achievement of mankind. The individual must continue to find the collective life of man his ultimate moral frustration, as well as his fulfillment" (DST 168). Niebuhr

[6] R. Dickenson, "Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr: Brothers under the Skin?" RelLife 27/2 (Spring 1958): 163-71.

utilizes the relation between mystery and meaning to appreciate how people understand and estimate completion - in history or beyond history, as partial or as complete. As soon as we understand historical completions as absolute, we are tending toward ideology (ND 2, 2-6; FaH 214; for Rahner see TI 6, 43-58). The problem of death is deeply involved with the problem of sin. We die with an uneasy conscience: "Our situation is that, by reason of the freedom of our spirit, we have purposes and ends beyond the limits of the finiteness of our physical existence. Faith may discern the certainty of a final completion in life beyond our power, and a final purging of the evil which we introduce into life by our false efforts to complete it in our own strength. But faith cannot resolve the mystery of how this will be done." (DST 170)

"A faith which resolves mystery too much denies the finiteness of human knowledge, including the knowledge of faith" (DST 171). A culture which prizes reason too easily does this because all human knowledge contains the ideological 'taint' by which it pretends to know more than it does. "It is finite knowledge gleaned from a certain perspective: but it pretends to be final and ultimate knowledge" (ND 1, 194). A faith which is overwhelmed by mystery does not deny the clues of divine meaning which shine through the perplexities of life. "The proper combination of humility and trust is precisely defined when we see, but admit that we see through a glass darkly" (DST 171). In the relation of mystery and meaning something is much larger at work than Niebuhr's epistemological understanding of individuals and groups. John M. Russell argues convincingly that Niebuhr has an implicit epistemology, and that Paul Tillich's critical statement about Niebuhr's lack of epistemology (Tillich 1971, 337-45) is found wanting. (Russell l986, 78)

2.3 Mystery and hope

Niebuhr contrasts our view of freedom, of finiteness, and of completion with mystery, meaning, and hope. He is convinced that "only a power greater than our own can complete our incomplete life, and only a divine mercy can heal us of our evil" (DST 169). Significantly, Paul adds this expression of Christian hope immediately to his confession that we see through a glass darkly (1 Co 13:12): "We see through a glass darkly now, but we shall then see face to face. Now we 'know in part' but 'then' we shall know even as we are known." (see FaH 214)

For Rahner, we can never entirely or exhaustively grasp God:

> The criterion by which human knowledge is measured so that God remains incomprehensible, represents a conception based on a model of knowledge in which an object is penetrated and mastered. In comparison with this paradigm of knowledge, human perception of God on earth and even in the state of final fulfillment remains deficient. God is, unfortunately, always incomprehensible, however much a man may know of [God] and however directly he may perceive [God] in heavenly beatitude. (TI 16, 231)

This hope is sufficiently problematized in Rahner's theory of knowledge. Niebuhr is here emphasizing a Pauline/Biblical epistemology over against a classical philosophical epistemology. He elucidates the Pauline appraisal of knowledge and he concludes that we are perplexed but not to despair. One might distinguish those who are not perplexed, those who are perplexed to despair, and those who are perplexed but not to despair (DST 169). "Those who are not perplexed have dissolved all the mysteries and perplexities of life by some simple scheme of meaning. The scheme is always too simple to do justice to the depth [of the human] problem. When life reveals itself in its full terror, as well as its

full beauty" (DST 169), then these little schemes of meaning break down. Optimism gives way to despair. The Christian faith does not pretend to resolve all perplexities. "It confesses the darkness of human sight and the perplexities of faith" (DST 169). It escapes despair because it holds to the goodness of God as revealed in Christ; the darkness of human sight emphasizes the incomprehensibility God will always own. While Niebuhr here turns to the Pauline hope that we will know in the future even as we are known by God, the proper sense we find then rests in Jesus. (see TI 4,120)

2.4 Mystery and Symbol: Speaking of God

For Niebuhr, the meaning of the Christian and theological symbols "represented primarily an ethical meaning, as opposed to ontological or even experiential meaning; and, as is clear from all his major theological works as well as his political and social writings, ethics meant for him social and political ethics" (NTH 37-38). The eschatological assertions made by Niebuhr are thematized, as it were, by the relation of love and justice. In the same way, his eschatological symbols focus on the idea of fulfillment, since speaking of the acts of God with finite language only leads to embarrassment and despair. It is much more human of us to try to understand the mysteries and meanings in our life. Niebuhr's primary concern in his exposition of a Pauline text is to understand that "the Christian faith is conscious of the penumbra of mystery which surrounds its conception of meaning" (DST 171). It must be emphasized that "our faith cannot be identified with poetic forms of religion which worship mystery without any conception of meaning" (DST 171). In a sense, for Niebuhr the mysterious God is made known, revelation of God's nature and purpose, apprehended by faith, must be declared, and this declaration rests upon the belief that the divine "is not mere

mystery, the heart of it having been disclosed to those who are able to apprehend the divine disclosure in Christ" (DST 171-2). For Rahner,

> revelation of the eschatological shows [the *eschata*] precisely *as a mystery*. […] More than ever, revelation is not the bringer of what was once unknown, perspicuous and manageable: it is the dawn and approach of mystery as such. It is absolutely essential for the eschatological to be hidden in its revelation" (TI 4, 330). Eschatology is "not a pre-view of events to come later – which was the basic view of false apocalyptic in contrast to genuine prophecy. […] Eschatology is the view of the future which man needs for the spiritual decision of his freedom and his faith. […] It enables man to take the daring decision of faith where all is open but dark. And thus the Christian can accept his present as a moment of the realization of the possibility established in the beginning (which is ultimately Christ), a moment of the realization of the pre-established future which is already present and definitive in secret. (TI 4, 334)

Niebuhr acknowledges that all mystery will be resolved in the perfect knowledge of God. Faith in a religion of revelation is distinguished on the one side from merely poetic appreciations of mystery, and on the other side from philosophies of religion which find the idea of revelation meaningless. The problem with the attempt to solve rationally the enigma of existence is that we are involved in the enigma we are trying to comprehend (DST 172). Concomitantly, Rahner notes that we cannot get a clear vision of the incomprehensible, and ultimate Holy Mystery; this is not within our grasp. The hidden God does not become comprehensible even in revelation (TI 16, 233-4). Nevertheless, Niebuhr and Rahner are not necessarily saying two different things: "The Christian faith is the right expression of the greatness and the weakness of man in relation to the mystery and the meaning of life. […] it is a confession at once of both weaknesses and strength, because it recognizes that the disclosures of the divine are given to man, who is capable of apprehending them, when made, but is not capable of anticipating them" (DST 172-3). The climax of eschatological revelation is necessarily what it actually is: "that God has revealed to man […] trinitarian self-disclosure and self-

communication in the grace of the crucified and risen Lord, a revelation already actual, though still only in faith" (TI 4, 334). One can also successfully argue that there is a chasm concerning the notion of mystery in regard to these theologians because Rahner consistently believes that the divine will remains a mystery even after death, while Niebuhr thinks that mystery will one day be eliminated: "we will know even as we are known" (I Co 13:12). Faith, we should remember, is very important for both of these thinkers. We have seen the importance of it for Niebuhr: faith is not only belief or trust, but also a sense of the meaning in human existence (FSM 127-31). The importance of faith for Rahner is further illustrated in this passage: "What then is the truth about the saving and healing power of faith? This power does exist because, and in so far as, faith lays hold of the whole man. The faith which places the whole of reality obediently at the absolute disposal of God becomes in this readiness for life and death the truth and the deed which lays hold of the healing salvation of God" (TI 5, 467). But Rahner problematizes the idea of faith: it can mean anonymous faith, i.e. "a faith which on the one hand is necessary and effective for salvation (under the general conditions which are required for justification and final salvation, i.e. hope and the love of God and neighbour) and on the other occurs without an explicit and conscious relationship (i.e. conceptual and verbal and thus objectively constituted) to the revelation of Jesus Christ contained in the Old and/or New Testament and without any explicit reference to God through an objective idea of God." (TI 16, 52; also TI 16, 53-59)

Beginning with Amos, Niebuhr believes in prophetic religion for which God is both the "creator and fulfillment of life" (InCE 66). He also holds firmly to the belief that "myth alone is capable of picturing the world as a realm of coherence and meaning

without defying the facts of incoherence" (InCE 26). Prophetic religion based on God as both the creator and fulfillment of life and 'true' myth are not at variance but complement one another. "Myth is a reality immeasurably greater than concept. It is high time that we stop identifying myth with invention, with the illusions of primitive mentality. […] Behind the myths are concealed the greater realities, the original phenomena of the spiritual life. Myth is always concrete and expresses life better than abstract thought can do." (Berdyaev 1935, 70)

Whenever Christians speak of the biblical God, or even when they may not refer to the divine directly, they do assume belief in transcendent meaning, and they may ask: How do I know? Speaking of God is a tricky, and yet needful, activity for Christians.[7] When we speak about the divine we are in fact bringing the transcendent God down from the *Deus absconditus*, which can only be understood as a symbol. Whenever symbol and especially myth occur, it is interpreted as a fanciful flight of fiction not to be taken seriously. However, symbols such as God must be taken seriously because they do point to a person's ultimate concern; and since it is beyond human speech we must settle for symbols which point to something beyond ourselves. (Tillich 1957, 41f.)

Stone writes that it is not easy to speak of God in the twentieth century (PtP 225); indeed, it has never been an easy task. He rightly adds that Niebuhr did not often speak about God because he asserted himself mostly as an editor and as a political journalist in numerous journals: academic, social, and popular. He did often use the term 'God' in his substantive writings, but then only to assert that God is the creator, redeemer, and judge who is known most clearly through Jesus Christ. "In Biblical thought, the grace of God completes the structure of meaning, beyond the limits of rational intelligibility in the

[7] Douglas J. Hall, *Thinking the Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 369.

realm of history, just as divine creation is both the fulfillment and the negation of intelligibility for the whole created order" (FaH 102-3). God is not made in any human image. We experience that God fulfills our life when we experience God as "*Deus absconditus*" (FaH 103; see Ps. 30). A biblical reference to God's mystery and incomprehensibility may be found in Is 55: 8: 'my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.' "The mystery of God's holiness must be guarded by not permitting any symbol of the divine in a force of nature" (FaH 104). Importantly, when Niebuhr speaks of Christ as the expected disclosure of God's sovereignty over history, "both life and history had found their previously partly hidden and partly revealed meaning, though it is not denied that God remains, despite this revelation, partly *Deus absconditus*" (ND 2, 35). This meaning of life which transcends the meaning of history "is disclosed and fulfilled in Christ and the Cross" (ND 2, 36-37). Human beings are too finite to grasp this disclosure, to comprehend the eternal by their own resources; a penumbra of mystery must remain, or else the meaning derived is too simple.

Niebuhr's understanding is indeed similar to "the absolute mystery called 'God' and in its unequivocal attachment in history to Jesus of Nazareth as the eschatologically definitive and historically manifested self-communication of this mystery" (TI 11, 82). Both Niebuhr and Rahner have discussed how far God's revelation takes us to the final mystery of God. Niebuhr did speak of certain events such as creation and the incarnation as 'eternity' and as 'God' entering history; he spoke of God in symbolic language because he knew the dangers of literalism (see # 1.7 & 2.1). Rahner knew of the necessity to refer to the incomprehensible God and the importance of a symbolic reference to God; he drew this from a doctrine of the incarnation of the Word, which in his estimation is no

more than an exegesis of "He that sees me, sees the Father" (Jn 14:9). If it is true that the Logos is the image, the likeness, reflection, representation, and presence filled with the fullness of the Godhead, then we can understand the statement: "the incarnate word is the absolute symbol of God in the world, filled as nothing else can be with what is symbolized" (TI 4, 237). Rahner refers to the notion of *philosophia negativa*, which is not dissimilar to *theologia negativa*: "In affirming God as wise, one must correctly understand that God's wisdom should not be equated with human wisdom (negation) and that God's wisdom excels all notions of human wisdom (eminence). The category of *theologia negativa* affirmed that inadequacy of applying human categories and concepts directly to God," and *philosophia negativa* is used "to underscore the limitations of all philosophical categories to express adequately human experience and reality" (CaCR 77). When we speak of God, we do so only by forming words about God, by working out ideas, by being conscious of the reality of God in a *thematic* form, that is, *a posteriori*.

> When I make this sort of claim to have experienced God immediately, this assertion does not need to be linked to a theological disquisition on the essence of this kind of immediate experience of God. Nor do I want to talk about all the phenomena that accompany such experiences – phenomena that of course have their own histories and their own distinctive characteristics. I'm not talking about pictorial visions, symbols, words heard; I'm not talking about the gift of tears and the like. I'm just saying that I experienced God, the nameless and unsearchable one silent yet near. […] I have also experienced God – and indeed principally—beyond all pictorial imagining. God, who […] comes to us out of [God's] own self in grace, just cannot be mistaken for anything else.[8]

Niebuhr also speaks of the 'hidden Christ,' which is a more personal experience of grace. He "is sure that groups of men and women who have never heard of the gospel message are led in various ways to a kind of genuine inner repentance and trust in a power not their own" (ON 210). Niebuhr advanced a program of biblical

[8] "God and Human Experience." In *Karl Rahner: Spiritual Writings.* Ed. P. Endean (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2005), 36-37.

demythologization, using the main biblical myths: creation, the fall, atonement, the resurrection, and eschatological matter or *eschata*. However, he seems to have misunderstood Rudolf Bultmann (see # 1.2.5) when he later made his program of demythologization specific to the New Testament known in *The Self and the Dramas of History* (1955) and in "Faith as a Sense of Meaning in Human Existence" (1966).

Rahner speaks of the experience of God and about various symbols for God. When we think of God, we are trying to use the best symbol or image or name for the divine (PM 5). "We do not begin to have something to do with God when we explicitly name God, when our knowledge of God acquires a conceptual and thematic structure of the divine. This latter is then that we speak of God, form a concept and mould this concept, that we fill out this one with a thousand names and statements: all this is necessary, good and right" (PM 6). Unfortunately, "we are able to see the manifest shortcomings in others but often fail to admit them in ourselves: what we see in others is presumably in us too; presumably we are as little inclined as these others are – with their irritability, their complexes, their finiteness, which we know – to recognize myself as I really am and face the cracks in my own nature. This is the same for our narrow and ready-made images of God which men always set up to a certain extent as idols and thus shut out the nameless God who simply cannot be pinned down in shape and form" (PM 10-11). The parson's God is a God who does not exist, the child's sweet, kind God is an idol as well as the narrow-minded God of the Pharisee. This "amounts to identifying with God ourselves and the world which we ourselves want to uphold and defend. God is never really more than a high-sounding word behind which we ourselves are masquerading, God transfixed in a concept" (PM 11). Rahner speaks of the

incomprehensible God whom we of course cannot grasp, the Holy Mystery into which all other mysteries must be reduced (see # 2.1), the Whither of Transcendence. This is at best an unthematized knowledge of God, that is, God not described in an objective set of concepts. What is really conveyed "is that 'God' is known through and in this transcendence previous to such concepts, even where the object of knowledge is something finite" (TI 4, 250). For 'God' is best known as nameless, undefined and unattainable; as soon as we name something, we are giving it structure not only morphologically, and it takes on a definite place and relevance in our routine.

Because the words we use are finite, God can be spoken of only in symbolic language. 'God' means precisely what we cannot say; it is that ultimate reality which remains for us "the absolute mystery, mystery most when we see him face to face" (PM 13; see I Co 13:12). The doctrine of God's incomprehensibility derives its full depth and its problematic only from the faith that an immediate vision of God is possible. "God's *incomprehensibilitas* may not be understood as the incomprehensibility of something distant. It does not really decrease, but increases, in the vision of God" (InG 109), in God's gracious self-communication "without which an immediate vision of God is impossible for a Thomistic metaphysics of knowledge." (InG 110)

2.5 Coherence, Incoherence, and the Christian Faith[9]

This text displays more than adequately Niebuhr's mature thought on meaning. It also reflects back to his early thought which is more like his later thought than often assumed. Niebuhr scholars will no doubt want to place *Does Civilization Need Religion?* (1927), *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), and perhaps also *Reflections on the End*

[9] JR 31/3 (July 1951): 155-68. – See also USQR 7/2 (Jan. 1952): 11-24; CRPP 175-203 and Robert McAfee Brown, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 218-36.

of an Era (1934), into the realm of Niebuhr's writings influenced by Marxism. In *Reflections* this is still the case, but Niebuhr begins to see flaws in the Marxist system, and he is moving on to a new source of coherence. *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* which appears in 1935[10] reflects Niebuhr's liberalism, as evidenced by his ethic of Jesus. Mythology in a Niebuhrian sense does not disappear; on the contrary it becomes vital to Niebuhr's thought. (more on this # 4.5)

"Coherence, Incoherence, and the Christian Faith" explains that the "whole world is characterized by a basic coherence" (CI 155), which causes one to reflect on what Niebuhr wrote in 1935, that high religion "is distinguished from the religion of both primitives and ultra-moderns by its effort to bring the whole of reality and existence into some system of coherence" (InCE 6). The world, which is ordered, or else it could not be known, is known perceptually through its "sequences, causalities, and essences" (CI 155). In order to grasp the coherence of the world we move from the physical to the metaphysical, we rise above the particular to the study of Being. "We instinctively assume there is one world and it is a cosmos, however veiled and unknown its ultimate coherences, incongruities, and contradictions in life, in history, and even in nature are" (CI 155). Life is ambiguous, and even though we may realize this, there is still a human desire to bring all these partial completions of history into one final system (ND 1, 194-8) which can never be the final order of things. If it were, we would on the one hand be catering to gradualism, and on the other hand we would be allowing for idealism and sentimentalism, which in many cases leads us to despair. (see # 1.6)

One of Niebuhr's more important contributions in this text is his explanation of the perils of making truth the basic test of coherence. He lists four shortcomings of such

[10] Publication of the 1934 Rauschenbusch Memorial Lecture at Colgate-Rochester Divinity School.

criteria. “Things and events may be too unique to fit into any system of meaning; and their uniqueness is destroyed by a premature coordination to a system of meaning, particularly a system which identifies meaning with rationality” (CI 155). It is our inherent nature to comprehend such “things and events” by means of organizational principles. This is why there are discussions concerning whether Niebuhr was a post-liberal (Macquarrie), a neoliberal (Dorrien), a neo-orthodox (Gilkey), or just a thinker who came along at a certain time in history and should be understood for what he really is (more on this # 3). This leads us to Niebuhr’s second criterion: “Realms of coherence and meaning may stand in rational contradiction to each other; and they are not fully understood if the rational contradiction is prematurely resolved, as for instance, between being and becoming, or eternity and time” (CI 156). Niebuhr acknowledges that the problem of time and eternity is not easily resolved in rational terms. “Hegel invented a new logic to comprehend becoming as integral to being; but his system could not do justice to the endless possibilities of novelty and surprise in historical development. He prematurely rationalized time and failed to do justice to genuine novelty” (CI 156). A primary example of a configuration that stands over against every rational system of meaning is to be found in human beings who are both in nature and above nature, finite[11] and free, which has been misunderstood by naturalistic and idealistic philosophies. Idealism deals with human beings in an abstract manner: it understands human being as a free mind, not as a contingent part of nature, and it elaborates a history of human beings as if it were a history of mind, without dealing adequately with people as determined by geography and climate, by interest and passion (CI 156). “Naturalism, on the other hand,

[11] The first time Niebuhr employs the word ‘finitude’, a substantive of the adjective ‘finite,’ is in “Christianity and Its Relation to the Perennial and the Contemporary Man” (1935).

tells the history of human culture as if it were a mere variant of natural history. These same philosophies are of course equally unable to solve the problem presented by the incongruity of mind and matter in ontology and of subject and object in epistemology. The one tries to reduce mind to matter or to establish a system of psychophysical parallelism. The other seeks to derive the world of objects from the world of mind" (CI 156). Then, Niebuhr writes that all science rests on "the common-sense faith that the processes of mind and the processes of nature are relevant to each other" (CI 156) – this in accordance with Aristotle's definition of truth as correspondence of intellect and thing (*adaequatio intellectus et rei*). Genuine freedom, with the implied possibility of violating the natural and rational schemes of coherence, "cannot be conceived in any natural or rational scheme of coherence" (CI 156). The mystery of human freedom, concomitant with the mystery of historic evil, and the incongruity of human beings "as both free spirits and creatures of nature" (CI 156), led Niebuhr to ponder the important question about human beings (ND 1, 1ff & ND 2, 1ff). For Rahner, human beings are a mystery to themselves, a question without answer, aware that there is a mystery greater than themselves, in which they may find the answer to the question they *are.*[12]

Niebuhr finds that judged by the standard of coherence, "Christianity seems to be a primitive religion because other high religions are more rather than less rigorous than science and philosophy in their effort to present the world and life as a unified whole" (CI 157). For him, of the high religions only Christianity, Judaism and perhaps Zoroastrianism are historical religions. Later he expounds: "The strict distinction between justice and love in Catholic thought is marvelously precise and shrewd, compared with

[12] TI 4, 253 & 116-20; TI 16, 243. – See Co, Book 10, # 2.

the general identification of the agape of the New Testament with the 'community-building capacities of human sympathy.'"(CI 160)

"The Christian answer to the human predicament, a divine mercy toward [human beings] revealed in Christ, which is at once a power enabling the self to realize itself truly beyond itself in love, and the forgiveness of God toward the self which even at its best remains in partial contradiction to the divine will, is an answer which grows out of, and which in turn helps to create, the radical Christian concept of human freedom" (CI 158). A full understanding of both the good and evil possibilities involved in human freedom requires an understanding of God beyond rationality. "God is defined as both just and merciful, with [God's] mercy at once the contradiction to and fulfillment of [God's] justice" (CI 159). God "is defined in trinitarian terms. The Almighty creator, who transcends history, and the redeemer who suffers in history are two and yet one. The Holy Spirit, who is the final bond of unity in the community of the redeemed, represents not the rational harmony of all things in their nature but the ultimate harmony, which includes both the power of the creator and the love of the redeemer." (CI 159)

"It is in searching for the ultimate meaning of the morally intolerable suffering of the righteous and comparatively innocent Israel that chapter 53 of Isaiah first establishes the relation between a moral obscurity *in* history with what becomes in the New Testament the final clarification of the moral obscurity *of* history, a suffering God" (CI 160 – italics mine). The range of this in Protestantism is wide because it tries to come to theological terms with a suffering God. For Niebuhr, the important questions are related to "the wisdom of the world, to the cultured disciplines which seek on various levels to

find congruities and coherences, the structures and forms of nature, life, and history." (CI 160)

Niebuhr refers to several schools of thought concerning erroneous ways of approaching the relationship between Gospel and culture. For Karl Barth there is no commerce possible between the foolishness of the Gospel and the wisdom of the world, between faith and culture. Because Barth's theology and ecclesiology emphasize the church's separation from culture, the church must constantly witness to the world by pointing to the resurrection. The church "must have something of the aura of martyrdom" CI 164), and Barth "bids the church wait until the issues are clear before it bears this heroic witness, just as he himself waited in witnessing against Hitlerism until the manifest injustices of a tyrannical state revealed their clearly idolatrous character" (CI 164). Stanley Hauerwas reflects in Barth's stance in *Grains of the Universe* (2001), where Barth holds the status of hero and Niebuhr is the villain. Like Barth, Hauerwas finds no point of contact between the church and the world. Barth does not acknowledge the wisdom of the world; it simply does not exist. All natural religion represents some form of idolatry, even though it contains a yearning after the ultimate understood by Paul as a point of contact between secular society and Christian society. Barth has irrevocably separated the two societies. Referring to the Barthians Niebuhr wrote twenty years earlier: "It is good to survey history *sub specie aeternitatis,* but it is not wholesome to the moral vigor of a people to make the eternal perspective the perpetual vantage point. It is because the Barthians do this that they cannot give themselves with great fervour to any

social program, however certain they may be that society is in need of reorganization and however clearly they perceive what steps must be taken for its redemption."[13]

Without being what John M. Russell would like him to be – namely a "doctrinal systematizer" (in KeB 32), Niebuhr suggests that we must acknowledge the fact that "all religions, particularly historically oriented faiths, must avail themselves of symbols, metaphors, and myths to point to the transcendent sources of meaning in the flux of the temporal and phenomenal reality" (FSM 131). He does believe that all revelatory events validate themselves by a divine breakthrough in the natural order: "There is a great spiritual gain in this position which is in accord with Christ's own rejection of signs and wonders as validations of his messianic mission" (CI 165). For him, Christian faith might be reduced to a philosophy if it becomes the key which unlocks the mystery of what humanity is and should be, and what God is in relation to humankind. Whereas philosophy seeks coherence, Christians presuppose an existential incoherence between human striving and the divine will. This can be appropriated only by faith, that is, existentially rather than speculatively, "because the recognition of their truth requires a repentant attitude toward false completions of life from the human standpoint." (CI 167)

The reason why Niebuhr uses symbols to express coherence and incoherence is because the human story is too grand and aweful to be told without reverence for the mystery and the majesty that transcend all human knowledge. Only humble beings "who recognize this mystery and majesty are able to face both the beauty and terror of life without exulting over its beauty or becoming crushed by its terror." (FSM 131)

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[13] R. Niebuhr, "Barthianism and the Kingdom." CCen 48 (July 15, 1931): 924-5. – For a collection of some of Niebuhr's articles on Barth and the Barthians see "Barth and the Kingdom" in Ach 141-93, and STH 24-37.

CHAPTER THREE - METHOD

> [Theology] must understand itself not as that science that develops itself more and more in a systematic drawing of distinctions down to the last possible detail, but rather as that human activity in which man, even at the level of conscious thought, relates the multiplicity of the realities, experiences, and ideas in his life to that mystery, ineffable and obscure, which we call God.
>
> (TI 11, 102)

Each of the Gods we know are indications of a striving in us, a desire. Our God becomes the answer to our deepest need. We do not sustain God. God sustains us. To meditate on the true God is not to think about God, but to be grasped by God. Rahner's *reductio in mysterium* means that all mysteries in theology must be brought back into the one mystery which is God; this is what Rahner calls method. (see # 2.1 & Intro. n.7)

Students of Niebuhr dispute over whether he is a theologian, an ethicist, a political analyst, or simply a philosopher, indeed "one of Barack Obama's favorite thinkers and a major figure of twentieth century American thought."[1] Such a dispute reveals more about an interpreter of Niebuhr than about Niebuhr himself. Niebuhr was a contemporary of the "Death of God" movement, and he found it odd that representatives of that movement dedicated their work to Paul Tillich (1886-1965),[2] since for Niebuhr to

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[1] "C'est […] l'un des philosophes favoris de Barack Obama et l'une des figures majeures de la pensée américaine du XXe siècle » (M. Eltchaninoff, « Le philosophe qui inspire Obama. » *Philosophie magazine* (Dec. 2008-Jan. 2009 – No 25) : 12-13.

[2] For instance Thomas J.J. Altizer in *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1966). - As Clayton Crockett rightly says, "In many ways, Death of God theology was understood as mining the religious implications of the replacement of human contact with the sacred by a secular culture lacking any such contact. [Gabriel] Vahanian challenged such assumptions and oppositions […]" ("Foreword" to G. Vahanian, *Anonymous God: An Essay on not Dreading Words* [series Contemporary Religious Thought, vol. 3]. Aurora, CO: The Davies Group Publishers, 2002, ix). The founder of the 'Death of God' movement in the 1960s with *The Death of God: The Culture of Our post-Christian Era* (1961), Vahanian has been also its most radical critic (see for instance *No Other God*, 1966) because for him the "assumptions and oppositions" Crockett is alluding to can be used not only as a defense of the previous agenda for theology - namely theism, but also as the promotion for a seemingly new theological program.

be dead implies first having had being, and then falling into non-being, which is antithetical to what Tillich thought and wrote about God. (FSM 127-8; see SyT I, 235-47)

Niebuhr contributed to the twentieth century theological dialogue mainly through his doctrine of sin. This has branded him a pessimist and caused many to think he was obsessed with sin. What this really means is that too many people have read only one of the two volumes of his Gifford Lectures in 1939 on *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Those who did not read - and even those who did read - the second volume published in 1943 chided Niebuhr for his lack of treatment of the Holy Spirit, his lack of ecclesiology, and his understated and even misunderstanding of eschatology. This chapter situates Niebuhr's theological thinking primarily with regard to what has been called 'theological liberalism'.

3.1 Liberalism: A Brief Outline

In the broadest sense "liberalism is identified with the rise of a modern technical society availing itself of democratic political forms and capitalistic economic institutions. This liberal society came to birth in Britain, France and America" (RNP 13) in opposition to the feudal culture of the European past. Liberalism in the broadest sense is synonymous with democracy. "Its strategy is to free the individual from the traditional restraints of a society, to endow the governed with the power of the franchise, to establish the principle of the 'consent of the governed'" (RNP 13). Liberalism has more distinct connotations: one of these arises from the history of technical societies, an other from the peculiar philosophy of the Renaissance and the French Enlightenment. The narrower connotation identifies liberalism "with the peculiar and unique ethos of middle-class life.

In any case, Vahanian views Tillich's legacy in a radically different way from the one suggested by Altizer. See G. Vahanian, *Tillich and the New Religious Paradigm* (2004).

But since the middle classes soon found the laboring classes to the left of them, liberalism soon ceased to be the exclusive philosophy of democracy" (RNP 13-14). In every modern industrial nation the word 'liberalism' has two contradictory definitions. On the one hand it is the philosophy of the more successful middle classes who possess enough personal skill, property or power and prefer liberty to security. On the other hand the word is used for those classes who prefer security to liberty and seek to bring the economic under control for the sake of establishing minimal standards of security of welfare. "It has been rather confusing that both of these strategies go by the name of liberalism."[3]

Can Christianity "claim to be religiously true if the Bible contains myths and historical errors? Is there a progressive Christian 'third way' between the authority-based orthodoxies of traditional Christianity and the spiritless materialism of modern atheism or deism" (IPR xiii)? According to Garry J. Dorrien, "Liberal theology arose in Germany as a creative intellectual response to these questions" (IPR xiv). And yet, before it reached momentum, similar responses arose in England, France, and the United States. In the latter it became much more a practical piety, the American tradition having its noted figures "honed through pastoral experience." (IPR xiv)

Theological liberalism "in America has indigenous roots, though its forerunners and founders were open to European trends accessible to them" (IPR xiv). Schleiermacher's *Speeches on Religion* (1799) influenced religious thinkers in America, but by the time his *Dogmatics* was released (1820) William Ellery Channing (1780-1842) led the Congregationalists which proclaimed to be liberal, modern, Arminian, experiential, and rationalist; "fatefully, it also produced another wellspring of liberal Protestant thinking in the imaginative theorizing of Harvard pastor [Horace Bushnell]"

[3] RNP 14. – See also R. Niebuhr, "Liberalism, Illusions and Realities." NewR 133/27 (July 4, 1955): 11-13.

(IPR xiv). Liberal theology, "as it developed in the 19th century was precisely a struggle against the 'timeless orthodoxies' of Protestant and Catholic doctrinal traditions, in favor of a Christianity in dialogue with its own social milieu. The world defined by the Enlightenment and (to some extent) the Romantic movement became the articulate center to which the Christian intelligentsia attempted to adapt the faith." (Hall 1991, 112)

Despite Niebuhr's passion for social ethics, "the ethical is for Niebuhr subordinate to the religious; the second commandment to love our neighbor . . . becomes a function of the first commandment to worship God alone" (ON 25; see TI 16, 231-49 & # 2.2). The liberal theology which arose from this as a philosophy of life is what Niebuhr critiqued. Niebuhr's vigorous polemic against exaggeration and generalization has not only obscured his debt to liberalism; it also leaves the impression that he was rejecting it altogether, whereas his concern was to correct certain distortions (PtP 37). He methodically isolated cultural traits which he regarded as central to complex issues; this enabled him to criticize liberalism at one of its weakest points, its confidence in moral progress in history. This, however, led him to equate liberalism with optimism and to attack liberalism when the illusion he wanted to criticize was sentimental optimism (PtP 38; CRN 286ff.). Sentimental and idealistic liberal expressions, World War I, and his experience in the industrial city of Detroit served as a transition for Niebuhr's mind toward realism (PtP 54). The liberalism that influenced much of American thought came not from Schleiermacher, but from his student Albrecht Ritchl (1822-1879) who disagreed with Schleiermacher and with his pietism. Niebuhr quotes Ritschl in his first volume of the Gifford Lectures: "In every religion what is sought with the help of the superhuman power reverenced by man is a solution of the contradiction in which man

finds himself as both a part of nature and a spiritual personality claiming to dominate nature."[4]

When liberalism arose in America its foes were the orthodox institutions and the established beliefs which were the crystallized products of the Protestant movement. For

> Liberalism represented again a dynamic element in religious life; it was a revolt against the fatalism into which the faith in divine sovereignty had been congealed, against the biblicism which made the Scriptures a book of laws for science and for morals, against the revivalism which reduced regeneration to a method for drumming up church members, and against the otherworldliness which had made heaven and hell a reward and punishment. […] The ultimate source of the belief in progress, prevalent for so long a time in the Western World, was not the Darwinian theory of evolution nor the success of science and technology nor yet the expansion of European civilization, though all of these reinforced; it was liberalism. (KiG 185 & 190)

To criticize the theory of evolution or Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) is to equally disapprove of a foundation of scientific research made prior to Darwin's bold assertion. Darwin's teaching "in no way detracted from God's role as creator," and the presupposition that "God created the world and everything therein was more important than how he created it" (Kerr 1979, 137). Liberalism was the theology Niebuhr grew up with and later learned to criticize. According to Daniel D. Williams, Niebuhr's criticism of liberalism and liberal Christianity was sweeping and inexact. A poignant observation not lost on Niebuhr, as one can read in his *Man's Nature and His Communities* (1965).

3.2 A Liberal, or a Neo-Orthodox Thinker?

Niebuhr's method is revealed when his reaction to the prevailing thought of the time is compared to other twentieth century theologians. He had a complex relationship with the cultural movement known as liberalism (PtP 35). Niebuhr's opposition to liberal thinking exponents have caused people to group him with Continental neo-orthodox

[4] A. Ritschl, *Justification and Reconciliation*, 199; quoted in ND 1, 178.

thinkers of his time such as Emil Brunner (1889-1966) and Karl Barth (1886-1968). This is a too simplistic position both theologically and culturally, although 'neo-orthodox' has become a nuanced and defensible term when it is still used. Niebuhr criticized Barth's theology in several essays (# 2.5n.13), and although Brunner's theology did interest him, he never thought of himself in the same camp as Brunner or Barth, but he was closer to the liberal and American tradition than to any Continental position popularly known as neo-orthodoxy (McCann 50n.1): "Whenever I read or argue with them, Brunner for instance, I always feel that their understanding of political and social problems has always made them foreigners to me." (RNB 214)

Niebuhr called Barth's theological thought a "new and terrifying subjectivism" (Ach 145) and found that the sense of the absolute and the transcendent became a real obsession in Barthian theology, so that all moral striving was reduced to insignificance (more on this # 3.5). Niebuhr cannot be easily identified with other so-called neo-orthodox theologians. In the Anglo-American world the predominant reading of Barth as a neo-orthodox theologian, though not unknown in Germany, has not been widely accepted. Tillich for instance "saw Barth in the spectre of a kergymatic theologian who wanted to derive contents of his theology solely from the Bible (and perhaps the confessions) without regard for the 'situation'. To the extent that the 'situation' was not systematically integrated into Barth's method, it became a 'neo-orthodox' method which served the cause of repristination." (McCormack 1995, 25-26)

It was precisely because ante-depression socialists were so enamoured with ideology that American intellectuals found them unattractive. Niebuhr atypically challenged this ideology that had swept through the American landscape. Even though he

had accepted the socialism which came with it, he was able to see the flaws in such a position: he found liberalism and especially some within the liberal camp becoming too utopian and sentimentalist for their own good. *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) may have been the tolling bell for Social Gospel advocates. Langdon Gilkey recalls his father, Charles W. Gilkey, exclaim: "Reinie's gone crazy . . . He's written this book and I don't understand at all why he has done it or what he is saying—and neither does Harry [Fosdick]" (ON 4). Niebuhr is still critiquing members of this movement in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935), and later on he said: "I am not […] able to defend, or interested in defending, any position I took in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*." (KeB 435)

Gilkey makes a strong case for Niebuhr fitting into the neo-orthodox camp; all one has to do is carefully read *On Niebuhr* (2001) to be swayed. First, if 'neo-orthodox' means Protestant orthodoxy, the term is inaccurate; but if 'neo-orthodox' means "a union of the Classical Christian symbols (creation, providence, revelation, incarnation, atonement, ecclesia, and eschatology)" with chosen modern themes "(historical consciousness, historical criticism, modern physical science, etc.)" then the term 'neo-orthodox' properly applies to Niebuhr (ON 26). For Gilkey, the label 'neo-orthodox' is more faithful to Niebuhr's own intentions, and "the sense of opposition to the then dominant liberal culture, secular and religious, echoes […] in his writings up to the 1950s" (ON 26-27). Niebuhr sees liberalism as a misunderstanding of the depth of human nature: "The liberal soul is pedestrian and uninspired. Its moral philosophy is always utilitarian and practical. It avoids the fanaticism and passions of the servants of the absolute and goes about its business to tame life and bring larger and larger areas of

human society into its circles of humane good will and prudent reciprocity" (REnE 261). For Gilkey, Niebuhr hardly seems conscious of having anything in common with the liberal culture, secular and religious; therefore he prefers the term 'neo-orthodox' because it describes what was going on in the work of Barth and Brunner on the Continent, and of Niebuhr in North America in the 1920s and 1930s.

Niebuhr's theology differed from Barth's and Brunner's in important ways. But he criticized also Orthodox (Conservative) Christianity with the same fervor he criticized liberalism. Conservative Christianity,

> with insights and perspectives in many ways superior to those of liberalism, cannot come to the aid of modern man, partly because its morality is expressed in dogmatic and authoritarian moral codes. It tries vainly to meet the social perplexities of a complex civilization with irrelevant precepts, deriving their authority from their—sometimes quite fortuitous—inclusion in a sacred canon. (InCE 4)

Gilkey and Dorrien argue that a better qualification for Tillich and Niebuhr might be 'neoliberal': "They blasted liberal theology repeatedly and contributed mightily to its eclipse, their thinking always belonged essentially to it, and they […] contributed greatly to it" (MLT 436; see ON 27). Dorrien may disagree, but his parameters for 'neoliberal' do fit neatly into 'neo-orthodox' (see MLT 537-9). This leads one to believe it would be best to say that Niebuhr is a liberal who criticized the liberal movement, both secular and religious. When we situate Niebuhr within the liberal movement we must appreciate his critical evaluation of liberalism which is not exclusively negative; although he could point out errors and shortcomings his critique offers also some positive solutions.

Daniel Day Williams (1910-1973) sees modern liberalism as the heir to the discovery of creative possibilities in human nature in the Renaissance. He states that the central problem of Niebuhr's theology is the attempt to combine insights of the

Renaissance and the Reformation (KeB 194). Niebuhr's theology cannot be forced into dependence on a single cultural outlook. His "thought bears a special relationship to liberalism, for his early thought was formed by liberalism, and he has developed his own theology largely by working out his criticism of liberal presuppositions. Therefore, by critiquing liberalism we have one way of getting at the meaning of his theology" (KeB 194-5). For Niebuhr, Christian liberalism is "that phase of modern Christianity which has taken over from the Enlightenment a conception of man's goodness and his potentiality for moral improvement, and which has reinterpreted the Gospel according to rational methods, and with a system of values which includes individualism, tolerance, and progressive achievement of a free and just order of society" (KeB 198). Niebuhr sees the overall relevance of the liberal outlook, and his own approach is depending on liberal achievements particularly regarding tolerance and the constructive function of reason coupled with the discovery and affirmation of the rights of the individual (see ND 2, 220-43).

> Christian liberalism rightfully used scientific reason to destroy crude supernaturalism in the understanding of nature. […] It saved the Christian mind from the error of making an inflexible and infallible law out of the historically conditioned precepts in the Biblical record. […] Most important in all of Niebuhr's positive appreciation of liberalism is his assertion that liberalism was right in declaring the relevance of Christian love to social issues even though it understood this issue far too simply. (KeB 203)

Niebuhr also contends that a "'hidden Christ' operates in history" (ND 2, 109n.6), so that some people come to know the truth Christ reveals outside of Christian culture. (more on this # 4.5)

Niebuhr is best known as "the demolisher of liberal tenets and culture" (CeA 151) - for instance the following ones he found fallacious:

a. That injustice is caused by ignorance and will yield to education and greater intelligence.

b. That civilization is becoming gradually more moral and that it is a sin to challenge either the inevitability or the efficacy of gradualness.

c. That the character of individuals rather than social systems and arrangements is the guarantee of justice in society.

d. That appeals to love are bound to be efficacious in the end. If they have not been so to date, we must have more appeals to love, good-will, and brotherhood. That goodness makes for happiness and that the increasing knowledge of this fact will overcome human selfishness and greed.

e. That wars are stupid and can therefore only be caused by people who are more stupid than those who recognize the stupidity of war.[5]

But when Niebuhr found "neo-orthodoxy turning into a sterile orthodoxy or a new Scholasticism," he was a liberal at heart (Rasmussen 1992, 22). The attempt to picture Niebuhr as a one-dimensional liberal is unfortunate. Dorrien refers to Niebuhr as a neoliberal, which he explains is "usually called neo-orthodoxy" (MLT 468). However, there is a real difference between *neoliberal* and *neo-orthodox*: one refers to a new form of liberalism expressing hope for change in the entire scheme of liberal thought - after all, to be liberal is to be free in thought and hope for the future. Although 'orthodox' has received a negative connotation, it also holds to the traditions which have been handed down to us. We have come to realize that historic faith is not as uniform as once thought.

Nathan A. Scott Jr. reminds us that 'neo-orthodoxy' was a term with which Niebuhr was never happy, and he adds that "it is a piece of journalistic jargon that has

[5] R. Niebuhr, "The Blindness of Liberalism." RadR l/4 (1936): 4. – See also PtP 39-40.

increasingly been rejected by many others, as a clumsy counter that distorts the actual situation in contemporary theology" (Scott 1963, 30). John C. Bennett asserted in 1971 that Niebuhr "was never 'Neo-orthodox' though he is often classified as such" because "while his thinking appropriated many insights in the thought of Paul and Augustine and Luther, there was not a trace of Biblicism or of theological authoritarianism in his thought."[6] Niebuhr found no solutions for twentieth century human beings in Marxism. Fackre writes that Niebuhr "rejected also 'liberalism,' the other political and social creed that claimed the allegiance of countless contemporaries" (in PRN 54). Gordon Harland (1920-2003) believes that Niebuhr and contemporaries such as Barth, Brunner, Tillich, Nygren, and Reinhold's brother, Richard would be "better understood as creative liberals" (ChF 46), a more suitable term for Niebuhr than 'post-liberal', since the latter simply implies something coming after liberalism.

Niebuhr knew Barth's groundbreaking commentary on Romans and its importance for the time, especially the second edition of *Der Römerbrief* in 1922. In his estimation 'neo-orthodoxy' was a "dubious phrase" which certainly could not define as diverse a group as Barth, Bultmann, and Tillich, "though they were all rebels against the old liberalism" (MMC 126). He readily admits that he is a liberal at heart and "that many of his broadsides against liberalism were indiscriminate" (MMC 117). In the course of these polemics, J. C. Bennett writes, Niebuhr "gave aid and comfort to what is often called 'Neo-orthodoxy,' and now he finds this very repellent and often he sounds more like a liberal." (in Landon 1962, 60)

Certainly Niebuhr was critical of some forms of liberalism, especially its more idealistic ideas and exponents, but "by the end of the [1930s] Niebuhr found himself

[6]John C. Bennett, "The Greatness of Reinhold Niebuhr," 27/1 USQR (1971): 5.

staunchly defending the very liberal culture he had so profoundly criticized" (WHF 113). From the 1940s onward, Niebuhr saw himself as a critic within the "traditions of democracy calling liberalism to a more realistic view of human limitations and a more profound appreciation of human aspirations. His numerous editorial fulminations against 'liberalism' were aimed more at religious liberals and reductive naturalists than at commentators and theorists whose own accounts of political liberalism often showed great appreciation for Niebuhr's corrective insights" (ChR 192). To sum up, the label 'neo-orthodox' does not apply well to Niebuhr; we best see him as a creative, i.e. critical liberal.

3.3 A Dialectical Thinker?

Niebuhr's thought is based on prophetic religion, which insists on the organic relation between historical and human existence, and transcendence as the ground and fulfillment of this existence (InCE 105). Prophetic thought leads him naturally from an either/or to the critical both/and of an otherworldly and stale orthodoxy on the one hand, and to a this-worldly and somewhat utopian liberalism on the other hand. For Niebuhr, most of the deep truths about humanity, history and reality must be expressed so as to do justice to contradictory, or seemingly contradictory, aspects of reality (KeB 231). Despite its finitude (see # 2.5n.10), the finite world is capable of revelation of the incomprehensive God. The most important characteristic of a religion of revelation is a twofold emphasis upon the transcendence of God and God's intimate relation to the world. In this divine transcendence human beings find a home in which freedom can be experienced and develop, but also the limits of freedom, the judgment, and ultimately the mercy which makes such a judgment sufferable. (ND 1,126)

Dialectical theology is that mode of thinking which defends the paradoxical character of faith over against the speculations of reason and vindicates the former against the latter. There must be a 'yes' and a 'no', and it is ironic that although Niebuhr does not fit into the classic definition of a dialectical theologian, he sustains this 'yes' and 'no', while Karl Barth, a noted dialectical theologian, has a more propositional than dialectical 'yes' and 'no' in his theology (Tillich 1935, 127; see RNA 41). Barth's specification of God as the Wholly Other makes knowledge of God impossible for humans; all knowledge is initiated by God through revelation of his Son Jesus Christ whom some inexplicably reject. Barth's *caveat* regarding rejection is excusable because there has been no conversation, no real communication with the people God wants to bring to salvation, and hence no real knowledge of what they are rejecting.

A fine explanation of Niebuhr's method is given by John C. Bennett: "There is a living dialectic in his thought which seems to grow naturally out of polemics. He is often much clearer in showing what is wrong with many positions than he is in giving content to his own position; or rather, we often have to infer this content from his criticisms of those who are in conflict with each other" (in PVT 60). According to Niebuhr, humans are able, through general revelation, to gain sufficient knowledge to come to the gates of salvation. Jesus Christ is the special revelation who leads people through these gates, though Niebuhr also believes that a "hidden" Christ operates in every culture for those who do not experience the revelation in Christ (ND 2, 109; ON 210n.7). For Niebuhr, Barth's logic is flawed in his usage of the term 'personality' as applied to the Wholly Other. While Barth "protests against all forms of analogical reasoning when dealing with the 'wholly other,' he nevertheless avails himself of the analogy of the concept of

0personality when defining the character of the divine," and he disguises this analogy by inverting it: "He declares that concepts of human personality are derived from the concept of divine personality" (ND 2, 66n.16), and he insists that God as person is not anthropomorphism. Yet, he cannot hide the fact that, however imperfect human personality is in contrast to divine personality, "he has taken the concept of personality from human life and applied it to the divine" (ND 2, 67n.16). Niebuhr thinks that Barth carries his Augustinian emphasis to a point where he is forced to deny what both Paul and Augustine affirm, namely that humans are formed in the "image of God and thus innately capable of knowing something about God" (CoPT 574). For Tillich, Barth's statements about God are paradoxical, not dialectical: they do not yield a process of thought in which 'yes' and 'no' are mutually involved; they permit only a constant repetition - although in other words - of the one paradox expressed in Qohelet 5: 1 – "God is in heaven and thou art on earth." "Between God and man there is a hollow space which man is unable to penetrate. If it were possible for him to do this he would have power over God. […] But no creature has such power." (Tillich 1935, 130)

Niebuhr's theology preserves statements which from a rational point of view do appear contradictory or at least in a state of tension. But his theology is not Barthian, nor should it be seriously considered as a corollary of the dialectical theology of his contemporaries. He was engaging a real biblical and political theology. His programme is outlined in *Beyond Tragedy*: "The biblical view of life is dialectical because it affirms the meaning of history and of man's natural existence on the one hand, and on the other insists that the center, source and fulfillment of history lie beyond history" (BeT ix). For Davies, "Niebuhr is one of those rare thinkers in whose mind the immediate and the

ultimate are in organic, dynamic relation. They are not static entities in his mind." (Davies 1945, 11)

3.4 A Biblical Thinker? – Biblical Symbolism and the Four Primary Myths

Whenever Niebuhr refers to Biblical (uppercase B) in expressions like 'Biblical revelation,' 'Biblical faith,' 'Biblical myth,' 'Biblical theology,' he means a specific view of theology representing the authentic message of Scripture for the churches and for us today. Biblical faith represents a definite and particular understanding of the meaning of the biblical corpus. This use of uppercase B is to be contrasted with the use of lowercase b (ON 65fn.12). Written with lowercase b, the word 'biblical' refers to the corpus of documents in the Scriptures and connotes no definite or particular view of theological understanding of what those widely varied documents may say. Therefore, biblical myths may refer to the scattered myths of the Hebrew Scriptures. Gilkey realizes that contemporary biblical scholars do not agree that there is one 'Biblical theology,' that is, one agreed-upon religious message offered by the whole biblical corpus. This places a higher emphasis on Niebuhr's use of 'Biblical' to designate a particular understanding of faith, myth, and theology (ON 65n.12). It would be somewhat wrongheaded to do systematic theology without trying to incorporate some biblical exegesis. Niebuhr does not do this in a zealous fashion, which he has rightly called the pride of humility. This is a temptation to which he often felt himself attracted (ReR 5). This may explain the critique that his theology ignores the Holy Spirit.[7] Throughout his writings Niebuhr deals with this issue in an implicit way, for instance in volume 2 of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* with reference to Paul's letter to the Galatians. (ND 2, 99-120)

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[7] For such a critique see Rachel H. King, *The Omission of the Holy Spirit from Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1964.

Niebuhr's framework of consistent Biblical symbolism is to be found in the eschatological signs interpreted in a non-literal way. Paul Tillich observes that Niebuhr builds his theology around the four biblical symbols: creation, fall, salvation and the consummation (KeB 39). This theme is initially brought to light in Niebuhr's text "As Deceivers Yet True" in *Beyond Tragedy* (1937), a sermonic essay that develops the idea put introduced in *Reflections on the end of an Era* (1934) and in his *Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935) that classical Hebrew mythology contains essential truths about human nature, but because it contains human images it risks corruption if its purpose if not properly understood. (RN 97)

According to Niebuhr, the myth of creation teaches that humans are created in the image of God and as creatures; the former emphasizes human self-transcendence, the latter, human dependence on the flux of time and nature (RN 105).The "Biblical doctrine of Creator and creation is the only ground on which the full height of the human spirit can be measured, the unity of its life in body and soul can be maintained and the essential meaningfulness of its history in the finite world asserted" (ND 1, 136). The myth of creation "insists that the person is a unity of nature and spirit. The harmony and balance between the two aspects of human nature represents the goodness of creation, and the inducement to sin is caused through anxiety which is a concomitant of creatureliness" (RN 105). The myth of creation "encompasses the mystery that transcends all our modes of coherence" (ON 67) and apprehends meaning within "the realm of mystery which stands at both the beginning and the end of man's effort to comprehend the coherences and sequences of his world rationally. […] Its role is to express the realm of mystery as both the fulfillment and negation of reason." (FaH 51 & 54). "The story of the fall is a

primitive myth which modern theology has been glad to disavow" (BeT 10). In its literal form, the myth is an account of the origin of evil.

> The orthodox doctrine of 'original sin' is an effort to extend the history of sin from its origin through successive generations of mankind. It therefore becomes a doctrine of 'inherited corruption,' the precise nature of which could significantly never be found by theologians, but which they most frequently identified with the sexual lust, attendant upon the process of generation. If original sin is an inherited corruption, its inheritance destroys the freedom and therefore the responsibility which is basic to the conception of sin. (InCE 55)

The serpent, which is the symbol of the principle of evil, does justice to the idea that sin always precedes itself. (InCE 73)

The idea of God choosing Israel as an act of grace, since Israel had no power or virtue to merit the choice, represents a radical break in the history of culture. "It is, in a genuine sense, the beginning of revelation; for here a nation apprehends and is apprehended by the true God and not by a divine creature of its own contrivance. The proof of the genuineness of His majesty and of the truth of His deity is attested by the fact that he confronts the nation and the individual as the limit, and not the extension, of its own power and purpose." (FaH 104)

"The doctrine of Atonement and justification is the 'stone which the builders rejected' and which must be made the 'head of the corner.' It is an absolutely essential presupposition for the understanding of human nature and human history" (ND 1, 148). Here, Niebuhr's thought is centered on the meaning of the Christ-event. He briefly summarizes the position of liberal Christianity thus: this Christ-event quickly lost its central position so that "modern liberal Protestantism knows less of its meaning or significance than the Middle Ages did" (ND 1, 148). The reasons why the atoning work of Christ is viewed as the "head of the corner" is summarized as follows: it is at the Cross

that we learn the exceeding sinfulness of humans, that the best as well as the worst in history is involved in rebellion against God, that every 'majesty and virtue,' which is tenable in history, is involved in the crucifixion of a 'prince of glory.' "But he who dies upon the Cross is essentially man, and we learn that sin is not a necessary part of our nature." (TRN 116)

The Atonement reveals the relevance and meaning of history: it defines the ethical character of that meaning. Because the wisdom and power of Christ gives life its meaning and guarantees the fulfillment of that meaning, the Atonement becomes a source of power for faith to shatter and reconstitute the self. "The doctrine of the Atonement is the final key to the Christian interpretation of history" (TRN 121); it is neither an incomprehensible remnant of superstition nor a completely comprehensible article of faith. It transcends human wisdom and yet is the beginning of the unreachable limit of human wisdom in that it contains symbolically all that Christian faith affirms about what we ought and ought not to do, about the obligations and final incapacity to fulfill them, about the importance of decisions and achievements in history and about their final insignificance (ND 2, 212). The atonement is the center of life and experience. "If any other principle of coherence is postulated, explicitly or implicitly, it is a subordinate centre" (RN 110). When the paradox of grace is maintained, the atonement will institute repentance and new life. God's love for sinners is manifest, and the suffering of God because of our sins is disclosed. Because of God's love for us, God will finally complete our incompleteness (ND 2, 57). Faith in the atonement will lead to eschatological hope. (ON 82-83)

Christ's second coming and the attendant eschatological symbols are on the one hand paradoxical expressions of God's sovereignty over the drama of history, and on the other hand reveal the final fulfillment of fragmentary meanings through the power and mercy of God. The second coming of Christ involves "all the profoundest characteristics of the Christian religion" (BeT 21) and "distinguishes the Christian hope from all rationalistic and mystical otherworldliness; the parousia is at the 'end' of history, not above it" (TRN 122). Yet it is not a point in history, and it distinguishes the Christian expectation from all forms of utopianism.

Niebuhr lists three important aspects in the symbol of the last judgment for a Christian understanding of history: 1) Christ will be the judge of history; 2) since all historical realities are ambiguous, no absolute distinction between good and evil is possible, but this does not prevent the possibility and the necessity of a final judgment on good and evil, should they not be swallowed up into a distinctionless eternity; 3) there is no achievement or partial realization of the last judgment in history, no fulfillment of meaning or achievement of virtue by which humans can escape the final judgment (ND 2, 293). Hope in resurrection "embodies the very genius of the Christian idea of the historical. On the one hand it implies [that it] will fulfill and not annul the richness and variety which the temporal process has elaborated. On the other it implies that the condition of finiteness, which lies at the basis of historical existence, is a problem for which there is no solution by any human power." (ND 2, 294)

3.5 Christian Realism

We need to take the evidences of modern science more seriously than Karl Barth and the Barthians and also an existentialist such as Kierkegaard. An option is called for,

which Niebuhr defines as 'Christian Realism' (CI 165; see CLCD). A Christian realist must depart from the biblical picture of life and history. And yet, insists Niebuhr, we can be completely biblical in interpreting the drama of history as an engagement between human beings and God: "We can recognize in the course of history particular events which have a special depth and penetrate to the meaning of the whole, that is, revelation." (CI 165)

According to Harland, Christian Realism "is the label which best describes Niebuhr's social and political thought. […] Niebuhr was a realist but he was a Christian realist, and that meant he was continually showing how the Christian understanding could widen the American policy" (Harland 1994, 118). Christian realism

> informed [Niebuhr's] critique of alternative positions. He agreed with the realists in their appreciation of the power of self-interest as the only thing operative. He agreed with idealists who understand that love is the law in our life and that in both personal and social life we need to be drawn out of ourselves and saved from the destructive consequences of self-centredness. However he found it difficult to abide the sentimentalist who not only takes love into account but thinks it can be readily realized in group life if only we have the will. A viable Christian social ethic, he constantly urged, was marked by a strong sense of responsibility to realize the greatest possible measure of justice in the concrete situation, and an understanding of human nature that frees us from both illusions and despair. (ChF 16-17)

Niebuhr's Christian realism did have antecedents: D.C. Macintosh's *Religious Realism* (1931), W. M. Horton's *Realistic Theology* (1934), and H. P. Van Dusen's *God in These Times* (1935) influenced Niebuhr's option "for a church whose call would produce religious or Christian realists" (CRN 1). While these figures contributed to the development of the concept of Christian realism, its most important exponent was Reinhold Niebuhr (CRN 2), whose writings are replete with this notion.

The "necessary idealism and the equally necessary realism can be held together in terms of a Christian faith which refuses to make sin and self-interest normative, but which also understands that human history offers no simple way out of the kingdom of pure love and complete disinterestedness." (ChPP 61-62)

> Since all political and moral striving results in frustration as well as fulfilment, the task of building community requires a faith which is not too easily destroyed by frustration. Such a faith must understand moral ambiguities of history and know them not merely as accidents or as the consequences of the malevolence of this man or that nation; it must understand them as permanent characteristics of man's historic existence. (RNP 197; see CLCD 186-7)

By Christian realism Niebuhr means that "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary" (CLCD xiii). Thompson begins his assessment of Niebuhr thus: "No serious student of Niebuhr's thought can be unaware of his essential and inevitable political realism. […] In his concern that ethical values be affirmed, he questions whether realism itself is enough. Its inadequacies arise from its involvement in the grime and heat of the world's struggle and its unwillingness to be deflected from immediate issues and duties." (in KeB 172)

Theology is always born of a context, and Niebuhr's Christian realism likewise is a response to the prevailing thought of the time – namely the possibility of unmitigated human progress ironically given impetus by Darwin's theory of evolution. Niebuhr was in the midst of developing a distinct perspective in his "understanding of human nature and social realities, relating biblical faith to politics and culture while distinguishing between it and those realms, in apprehending mystery and meaning in human experience and in the pinnacles of Christian faith, and facing the perplexities of life and history without illusions or despair" (NHA 3). These words by Charles C. Brown capture what

became the centerpiece of Niebuhr's method. Additionally, for one who honed this line of thinking and for those who come after,

> Christian Realism is not so much a system of thought but a caste of mind. It is a complex of perspectives that, for Niebuhr, have been biblically derived and validated by experience—perspectives about human nobility and sin; human anxiety and the quest for security through power; the ambiguous role of reason, morality and religion, the nemesis of pride and power; and the persistent, disturbing intervention of a Divine 'oughtness' in human undertakings.[8]

We can compare Niebuhr's thought on Christian realism with Rahner's own concern, for instance when he notes in "Theology of Power": "We affirm that in actual life conflict and struggle are not always avoidable, we have not of course decided in any way what forms of resistance are morally permissible in a given historical situation" (TI 4, 401). Here, Rahner is giving some thought about the 'just war theory,' a roadmap which ran through Roman Catholic thought: one has to worry about how it must be qualified to meet modern circumstances. In "The Peace of God and the Peace of the World" Rahner says:

> When applied in an anti-ideological sense, therefore, *Christian realism* soberly recognizes the existence of power and therefore of conflict as one side of human living. It does not raise this power to the status of an ideology or accord it an absolute value. It precisely does not want this power to be administered by an ultimate and central tribunal within this present world. It is, therefore, against any ideological or any practical monopolization of this power, but at the same time it also recognizes that it is inevitable that there shall be something in the nature of conflict, contradiction and war. (TI 10, 382)

3.6 A Social Gospel Theologian

Although William D. Lindsey wishes us to revisit the vision Shailer Mathews had for American Christianity prior to the successful assault on it by the Niebuhr brothers, he rightly acknowledges that the Niebuhrs were children – not just merely external critics -

[8] Robert C. Good, "Reinhold Niebuhr: The Political Philosopher of Christian Realism." *Cross Currents* 11/2 (Summer l961): 265.

of the Social Gospel movement. Reinhold witnessed first hand the effects Henry Ford's new automobile production line had on his congregation members while a pastor in Detroit (more on this # 4.2). He too fought for social justice, and what he found wanting about the Social Gospel movement and several of its exponents was their "strikingly naïve" social posture (InCE 173). About Mathews he said that "his idealism epitomized the moralistic stupidity of the liberal approach to politics, and his mythology dispensing modernism typified what was wrong with liberal theology" (quoted in MLT 455). The two Niebuhr brothers (Helmut Richard and Reinhold) did offer at once a sound critique of this sentimental vision of the Social Gospel,[9] and a correction of its vision of human nature which all but forgot about sin. This early phase of the Social Gospel (see SoG 285) was not done in by these critiques; it was finally forcefully overwhelmed by humanity's "downward" tendency.[10] As can be seen in *A Theology for the Social Gospel*,[11] Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918) was the most realistic and therefore closest in thought and language to Niebuhr: he devoted six chapters to sin or evil, one of them dealing with "The Fall of Man." Rauschenbusch, the Social Gospel's "most penetrating theologian, […] had no naïve expectations that social change would abolish the sinfulness of human beings; he never wholly lost his tragic sense. But many followers of the Social Gospel read his affirmations more enthusiastically that they did his reservations" (KeB 128). Niebuhr and Rauschenbusch, two exponents of the Social Gospel, believed evil could not be defeated in history. This and other notions such as the Kingdom of God were similar in the two thinkers. For Rauschenbusch, the Kingdom of righteousness happens all the

[9] SoG 259. See LNTC and also "Henry Ford and Industrial Autocracy." CCen 43/44 (Nov. 4, 1926): 1354-5; "How Philanthropic is Henry Ford?" CCen 43/49 (Dec. 9, 1926): 1516-7; "Ford's Five-Day Work Week Shrinks." CCen 44/1 (Jan. 6, 1927): 15-16. – For H.R. Niebuhr's critique see KiG 161-3 & 183-98.
[10] Walter Rauschenbusch, "Conception of Missions." In R.T. Handy 1966, 271-72.
[11] Chicago, IL: Willet, Clark & Co. (1937). Middleton, CT: Wesleyan Press, 1988.

time in installments. […] we are on the march toward the Kingdom of God and getting our reward by every fractional realization of it which makes us hungry for more."[12] For Niebuhr, history documents only partial completions and provisional meanings, and "history as we know it is regarded as an 'interim' between the disclosure and fulfillment of its meaning". (ND 2, 288)

3.6.1 Ethics

In *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935) Niebuhr tries not to defend, but to *amend*, some of his thoughts. In the preface he writes:

> The issues at stake are now as they were then. The primary issue is how it is possible to derive a social ethic from the absolute ethic of the gospels. The gospel ethic is absolute because it merely presents final law of human freedom: the love of God and the neighbor. A social ethic must be concerned with the establishment of tolerable harmonies of life, tolerable forms of justice, and tolerable stabilities in the flux of life. All this must be done not by asking selfish people to love one another, neither by taking their self-love for granted. These harmonies must be created under 'conditions of sin.' That is, a social ethic must assume the persistence of self-regard, but it cannot be complacent about any form of partial or parochial loyalty or collective self-interest. (InCE 9-10)

Social ethics and *Applied Christianity* - some would prefer *orthopraxis*, but this may be overstepping Niebuhr's actual method by relating it too closely to liberation theology - play a large part in Niebuhr's thought and life, although not from a merely abstract vantage, as Paul Ramsey warns: "Readers of any of Niebuhr's books need not be reminded that he too believes there is no explaining things by reference to a fixed and given human nature" (Ramsey 1962, 113). For such a free spirit as the human being actually is, love is the law of life. Niebuhr agrees that there is no compelling total depravity that forces us to behave as badly as possible; consistent self-destruction through self-seeking is prevented by various forms of common grace. "The law of love is the final

[12] W. Rauschenbusch 1917, 227. – See R. Dickinson, "Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr: Brothers Under the Skin?" RelLife 27/2 (Spring 1958): 163-71.

law for man because of his condition of finiteness and freedom. It is not only the law of his existence, because man is, despite his freedom, a creature of nature who is subject to certain natural structures" (FaH 174-5), which have more negative than positive forces. *Agape* "is the final law of human existence because every realization of the self which is motivated by concern for the self inevitably results in a narrower and more self-contained self than freedom of the self requires" (FaH 174-5). Niebuhr is convinced that life cannot be lived in any creative sense without a deeply ingrained principle of meaning: "It is difficult, if not impossible, to live without presupposing some system of order and coherence which gives significance to one's life and actions" (FaH 153). Prophetic faith, which Niebuhr would call Biblical Christianity, is one that looks for meaning in humanity, and yet finds that human beings and history are ambiguous. "It is the genius and the task of prophetic religion to insist on the organic relation between historic human existence and that which is both the ground and the fulfillment of this existence, the transcendent." (InCE 105)

The root of Niebuhr's ethic is implicit, not explicit. He looks at human nature and its dependence on the law of love and its tragic character, on responsibility and on tolerance to work out a thoroughgoing ethic. Moral ethic always tries to promote harmony and overcome chaos. Paradoxically, "every conceivable order in the historical world contains an element of anarchy. Its world rests upon contingency and caprice" (InCE 106). Niebuhr sees "humans as creatures formed in the image of God for relationship with God and with one another; […] for a life characterized by faith, love, and hope. […] Creature and image, while distinguishable, are not separable; […] they form a unity in each person, a unity that is creative at once of the individuality of each

person and of the human community on which each human essentially depends" (ON 82). This unity of human creativity and its sinful condition replaces Niebuhr's earlier duality of impulse and reason. Both are held together by the "internal description of temptation," i.e. anxiety. (ND 1, 182)

History and human beings are of importance to the coherence and incoherence of life, to the meaning of freedom and finiteness. Niebuhr's theology is organic, which does not mean consistent, for consistency occurs often for its own sake because we are within history and makers of history, so that the symbols used to represent God's activity cannot be properly exhausted by finite language. Niebuhr's doctrine of love – especially as the impossible possibility – reminds us that perfection or fulfillment will not be revealed within history; we must therefore use symbolic expressions to understand the *eschata*. Niebuhr suggests that "a too consistent search after self-fulfillment is bound to be self-defeating. On the contrary, self-fulfillment requires that the self forget itself in its commitment to the social purposes of life" (MaO 182). Rahner wrote an important essay on this subject (TI 6, 231-49), yet many theologians would rather quibble over exactly who the neighbor is than practice love, although the answer to the former is essential to the latter. (see # 2, 2)

Both form and content of the drama of the Cross-event require that we apprehend it with our entire being and not merely by reason. As revelation, the Cross-event challenges the rational creature unable to give meaning to the individual and to collective history, whatever partial and tentative meanings may be discerned. The specific content of the revelation challenges us as sinful creatures whose various methods of bringing

history to a meaningful conclusion always involve some pretension revealed in light of the Cross as false conclusion. (FaH 142)

The ethical implications of the Cross illumine the actual character of human history. “This insight is possible only after the religious implications of the Cross have given answer to the problem which is presented by the character of history” (ND 2, 75). The seeming absurdity to view the ultimate wisdom of faith in Christ as the end of history and the fulfillment of life’s meaning is the problem. For Niebuhr the Cross properly fulfills history and brings meaning to life, and Niebuhr disagrees with Tillich who understands concupiscence as meaninglessness, while he understands it as becoming lost in another type of pride, in a mirrored image of self-pride and pride of power. Sensuality, as Niebuhr names it, is becoming lost in something else to the degree where one loses oneself. This is just another form of self-pride, for the mirror itself is an idealistic illusion. The different contexts are Tillich’s Post-war experience when people were seeking for meaning, and Niebuhr’s earlier struggles with the remaining residue of progress gospel. (ON 140n.15; SyT 1,186-289)

3.6.2 Memory

Niebuhr expands a good deal on Augustine’s concept of memory. “Great is the power of memory, a fearful thing, O my God, a deep thing and boundless manifoldness; and this thing is the mind and this am I myself. What am I then, O my God? What nature am I?” (Co 10, 7-17) Memory for Niebuhr represents our capacity to rise above, even while within, the temporal flux. It proves that time is in us as surely as we are in time. “The most obvious definition of ‘history’ is that it is a record or memory of past events” (FaH 18). For Niebuhr, memory is the basis of history because memory represents our

ability to rise above history while remaining creatures within history. It is a dimension of existence in which present realities are interpreted through past events. This is so because both present and past realities do not follow necessarily from previous events. "The bewildering mixture of freedom and necessity in every historical concretion is rightly understood only if the particular and the unique acts of that which constitutes the flow of events are remembered in their uniqueness" (FaH 19). The memory of how events come to be prevent the present from appearing as an event of pure natural necessity. "Nations have a memory of the unique events of their origin and history, which furnishes the frame for a structure of meaning, distinguishing their history from the history of other nations and establishing a level of meaning above that of natural necessity" (FaH 19). History represents a "bewildering confusion of destiny and freedom," which does not conform to logical or natural coherence. It is comprehended as a unity by memory but not by logic." (FaH 20)

Central to Niebuhr's anthropology is the notion of *imago dei*. In his estimation this topic was first given due appreciation by Augustine (354-430):

> The conclusions at which Augustine arrives in the contemplation of this mystery of self-transcendence are of tremendous importance for the understanding of man's religious nature: 'I dive on this side and on that, as far as I can and there is no end. So great is the force of memory, so great is the force of life, even in the mortal life of man. What shall I do then, O Thou my true life my God? I will pass beyond this power of mine which is called memory; yea, I will pass it that I may approach unto Thee, O sweet Light. […] And where shall I find Thee? If I find Thee without my memory then I do not retain Thee in my memory. And how shall I find Thee in my memory if I remember Thee not?' (Co 10, 7-17, quoted in ND 1, 156)

Augustine in his earlier writings is close to the deification of one who descends into the secret chamber of one's mind (#1.3n.18). If one is far from oneself, how can one be near to God? (ND 1,157; JoEv 23, 10) Niebuhr follows Augustine's line of thought by

relying on historical consciousness to salvage a person from repeating the errors of history. Augustine's Biblical faith prompts him to stop short of the mystic definition, since our powers continually point to the God they are not able to comprehend. Proximally close to mysticism and the mystery religions, he was drawing from both, not to mention the flourishing Gnostic writings in early Christianity. Mysticism, with Christianity at its best, is able to understand the height and depth of the human spirit in the relationship to God. Augustine believes that regarding the nature of human beings, there is nothing more blessed than the mind or reason; but to live according to these means to live according to the human will, whereas one ought to live according to the will of God (Retr 1, i.2).

Much of Niebuhr's thought on the nature of human being is gleaned from Augustine - for instance: "Human life points beyond itself. But it must not make itself into that beyond. That would be to commit the basic sin of [human beings]. It can, therefore, understand the total dimension in which it stands only by making faith the presupposition of its understanding" (ND 1, 158). Niebuhr then quotes Augustine: "For although, unless he understands somewhat, no man can believe in God, nevertheless by the very faith whereby he believes, he is helped to the understanding of greater things. For there are some things which we do not understand unless we understand them; and there are other things which we do not understand unless we believe them.'"[13]

In the Christian faith Jesus Christ is both the revelation of God and of the nature of human beings. Historical and yet more than that, the life of the human being "transcends the possibilities of history but remains relevant to all historical striving, for all historical goals can be expressed only in supra-historical terms." (ND 1, 163)

[13] Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, Ps. 118, *Sermo* 18, 3.

3.7 A Center to Niebuhr's Theology?

According to Durkin, the center of Niebuhr's theology is not "Christology or anthropology or the concept of the hidden God as critics often infer. Its centre is, in a sense, sociological in that the experience of a social group becomes the norm for interpreting all experience" (RN 79). Before agreeing or disagreeing with such a statement, we need to understand some of its assessments.

We have already mentioned that the crux of Niebuhr's method may be his Christian realism (see # 3.5) from where we can attempt to understand how he viewed anthropology, christology, and sociology. The hidden Christ (more on this # 4.4) cannot really be placed at the center of his theological method, though it does have a significant place in his notion of common grace.

Paul Lehmann finds the center of Niebuhr's thought in christology: the "central concern of *Nature and Destiny* and *Faith and History* is to show how the cross expresses the transcendental reality of Christ (*pro nobis*) and the transforming power of Christ (*in nobis*) in human nature and destiny" (quoted in RN 178). Harland agrees by saying: "The centrality of Christology in Niebuhr's thought is clear and of the highest importance" (TRN ix). According to Lehmann we need to keep three basic characteristics in mind in order to understand Niebuhr's christology: first, it is pivotal, not peripheral; secondly, Niebuhr's ideas about the person and work of Jesus Christ are implicit, not explicit; thirdly, Niebuhr's Christology is not just a development from *Does Civilization Need Religion?* (1927) to *Faith and History* (1949), from the transcendental reality of *Christus in nobis* to the transforming power of *Christus pro nobis* (Lehmann in KeB 255); it is "intended to be nothing more than the analysis of the truth about *Christus pro nobis* and

Christus in nobis in its significance for man" (Lehmann in KeB 253). It is an analysis and demonstration of the truth with the full recognition that this cannot ultimately be done. As to the references to Jesus, they are "diffuse and imbedded in an intricate context of cultural, sociological, and ethical analysis" (KeB 254). Niebuhr focuses on Jesus of Nazareth's ethic for instance in *Does Civilization Need Religion?* (1927) and "The Ethic of Jesus and the Social Problem" (1932), and he is still concerned with a liberal interpretation of Jesus' ethic in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935, 37-61). The "ideas about the person and work of Jesus Christ are rather more *implicit* than *explicit*, though there is a general movement of his thought toward a more explicit affirmation of the central significance of Jesus Christ" (KeB 255). In Niebuhr's theology, our greatness and weakness "are related to the mystery and meaning of life through the mythical apprehension of the divine disclosure in Christ. The Cross is both the source and the substance of this apprehension" (KeB 268). It is therefore important to highlight the relevance of mythical thought, insists Lehmann, because we easily forget this and merely conclude that Niebuhr's thought "moves in principle from reason to faith, from history to gospel, from anthropology to Christology. But exactly the opposite is the case." (KeB 270)

Lehmann and those who defend the centrality of christology in Niebuhr's thinking make an interesting but not compelling case. While they may be right to some extent, they also in some cases misinterpret Niebuhr's own argument for christology.

Durkin found a better answer to the question of the center of Niebuhr's theology by stating that it doesn't have a center, that it is rather scattered as were his interests: wherever he saw a cause, he found an opportunity for thought and for action. A

commonality was always the most vexing problem: as far as the understanding of God is concerned, the human being is in a much similar way a toddler than a child who comes to know the world around him, because God is always going to remain that to which we cannot give meaning (ND 1, 164). Niebuhr also sees that the love of Christ ending on the Cross after having existed in history is supra-historical in the sense that the love which Christ then embodies is the point where history culminates and ends. (ND 1, 164)

Lehmann was trying to save Niebuhr from the judgment of those who keep thinking that Niebuhr was in "the last analysis, an unreconstructured liberal with a very, very low Christology" (KeB 258). This, even though Niebuhr writes in 1926 in his Detroit parish diary: "For the life of me I can no more reduce Jesus to the status of a mere Galilean dreamer and teacher than I can accept orthodox Christologies." [14] Niebuhr also believed in the power of the resurrection. This in and of itself can and has been interpreted in several ways; because Niebuhr does not hold to a literalistic approach to the Atonement. Indeed, his Biblical interpretation has been understood as anything but biblical. Niebuhr knew very well that not everyone would believe that his insights into the Christian faith are correct; but he did not find any other interpretation of the Christian faith to have substance.

[14] LNTC 95. - For reason of convenience I have cited *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* by page number from the Louisville: KY: Westminster/John Knox (1980) edition. The demand of this work has led to several publications of this important work.

CHAPTER FOUR - MYSTAGOGY

Originally, mystagogy - a term which comes to us from the early church – was used to give a "theological explanation not only of the sacramental fact, but of each rite making up the liturgical celebration" (Mazza 1989, ix), and a mystagogue is one who initiates a neophyte into a mystery cult. For some, mystagogy as a procedure seems to go no further than explaining the significance of the symbolics of the liturgy and the church.[1] The symbolic nuances of the sacraments were recognized by an admitted low-churchman such as Niebuhr to have profound significance. As all structures within theology do, mystagogy developed and was interpreted differently over the years. For our purposes, "the practice of mystagogy is a counterbalance to an exclusively doctrinal catechesis, […] the mystagogical approach makes use of a whole variety of ways in which we perceive and communicate, including seeking, feeling, and hearing." (CaCR 264)

Niebuhr did not utilize the expression 'mystagogical theology,' and he probably did not understand himself as a mystagogue, one who initiates others into mystery. And yet in his writing and his sermons he did bring people to re-examine their thoughts concerning God. John Baillie recalled a woman comment after attending one of Niebuhr's Gifford lectures in March 1939: "I dinna understand a word ye say . . . but I

[1] David Regan, *Experiencing the Mystery: Pastoral Possibilities for Mystagogy*. New York: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994.

know somehow I ken that ye're makin' God great."[2] Rahner often talks about mystagogy. He says for instance that

> the dialogue with contemporary life which has been imposed on the Church cannot refer to what she and her members can contribute to improve social condition in the world. Her ongoing inescapable duty is to proclaim the living God and his forgiving and deifying nearness in his grace to Jesus Christ. […] We do not yet possess a mystagogy in the experience of God and his grace which would be practicable for the ordinary pastor and which would appeal to our sceptical, scientifically trained contemporaries. (GF 54-55)

Niebuhr's familiarity with the secular and the sacred vision of his time, the influence William James (1842-1910) had on him, his discussions with John Dewey (1859-1952) along with his years as a pastor in Detroit (1915-1928) which involved him in the Social Gospel movement - all this made of him a spokesman for a generation of thinkers.

4.1 Practical Grace

For Niebuhr, both personality and history are ontologically ambiguous: "The personality is bound by historical destiny rather than by natural or ontological necessity. The revelation of 'God in Christ' […] is a force of destiny for the community of faith which has been gathered by that revelation: the Christian Church. The Church does not exist to propound eternal ethical truths, though it significantly regards the 'love of Christ' as normative for human existence" (KeB 20). With reference to the fact that the alternatives in his time had proven to be erroneous and involved in utopian illusions, Niebuhr was convinced that "Christian apologists cannot hope for too much success, it has become progressively clearer in my mind, since I wrote several books on what line the apologetic venture of the Christian Church should take" (KeB 20). Niebuhr wrote

[2] J. Baillie, "Niebuhr's Gifford Lectures." *Union Review* 2 (March 1941) : 8.

Billy Graham about his evangelical perfectionist tactics and his lack of social justice.[3] Meaning prevails as Niebuhr's central theme and can be found in his theology of grace: Grace for him is "the acknowledgment that nature and history possess meaning" (RN 72) because in these two realms God is revealed (REnE 285). The experience of grace has been stereotyped by religious orthodoxy and made depend on the dispensations of religious institutions, the acceptance of dogmas, and faith in its efficacy in specific facts of history. (REnE 287)

Religious faith needs specific symbols, and Niebuhr understands the Jesus of history as a 'perfect' symbol of the absolute in history because aspiration to perfect love is realized in the life of Jesus and the human drama of the Cross. In fact, the experience of grace can be expressed in mythological terms if and when this does not become a peril to the ethical life. "For only in the concepts of religious myth can an imperfect world mirror the purposes of a divine Creator and can the mercy of God make the fact of sin and imperfection bearable without destroying moral responsibility for the evil of imperfection or obscuring its realities in actual history" (REnE 292). In the final chapter of *Reflections on the End of an Era* (1934), Niebuhr moves toward developing the "content and purpose of the ultra-rational framework" of his thought (RN 73). "Essentially the experience of grace in religion is the apprehension of the absolute from the perspective of the relative. The unachieved is in some sense felt to be achieved or realized. The sinner is 'justified' even though his sin is not overcome. The world, as

[3] "Proposal to Billy Graham." CCen 73/32 (August 8, 1956): 921-22; reprinted in LoJ 154-8.

revealed in its processes of nature, is known to be imperfect and yet it is recognized as a creation of God." (REnE 281)

Human beings are regarded as both sinners and children of God. It is in "these paradoxes that true religion makes reality bearable even while it insists that God is denied, frustrated and defied in the immediate situation" (REnE 282). Niebuhr has a strong sense of the weight of sin; he also has a strong sense of the paradoxical sense of the weight of grace. *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941-3) analyzes human's nature and need for grace. It may well be true that if one has not studied Niebuhr's doctrine of sin, then one has yet to be introduced to theology; but it would be foolhardy to leave the most vexing problem to humankind without any solution. "Niebuhr felt that in many areas of common life unexpected renewal constantly takes place" (ON 210). He contrasted Jesus' concept of the goodness of human nature with liberalism's understanding of it and found that Jesus believed the Kingdom of God will be established not by the goodness of loving people, but by the grace of God (REnE 283). There are "glimpses of the eternal and the absolute in human nature," and these glimpses eventually brought Niebuhr to the conclusion that the hidden Christ is present in ordinary experience (ON 210). We see in this a new awareness of other religions, of pluralism and tolerance, and also of other experiences than the Christian experience, namely secular experience. This new awareness will develop and thrive in interreligious dialogue. Niebuhr dismisses, to some extent, the idea of divine judgment on nonbelievers, and he recognizes a knowledge of God outside of the special revelation of Covenant and Incarnation, a universal redemptive action of God through human experience which he calls the 'hidden

Christ.' By labeling this action as 'Christ' Niebuhr shows that Incarnation and Atonement remain for him the unique and decisive revelation of God, of which there are other effective but incomplete manifestations. In this decisive event the agape of God is revealed (ON 210n.7). Niebuhr's hidden Christ is in affinity with Rahner's notion of anonymous Christianity (more on this # 4.5). Before showing that, a theological preamble for Niebuhr's understanding of communicating the gospel to Christians and the world must be made.

4.2 The Detroit Experience

Niebuhr was thrust into the ministry after schooling at Elmhurst (1913), a weak version of the German gymnasium. It was a school which was poor in Latin and English. From 1913 on he went to his father's alma mater, Eden Theological Seminary, but he found it was more of the same. At Eden he met Samuel Press who will be influential in his life and help him to imagine the possibility of a ministry that would transcend the social and cultural confines of the Midwest German Synod. Press may have been responsible for Niebuhr's appointment as pastor of Bethel Church in Detroit in 1915. This helped Niebuhr to understand the place of social work in the ministry and as a foundational source for the comprehension of human nature. There he met people who were working for Henry Ford, particularly William J. Hartwig, a member of his congregation who used his money to care for Ford employees during the infamous 'retooling' periods, and Episcopal Bishop Charles Williams, a leading figure in the fight for social change. Detroit will be a time of learning and experience for Niebuhr. Hartwig, an advocate for the unionization of labor in Detroit, dared to insist that workers required

collective bargaining in a city in which all the new industrialists insisted that the future of the auto industry required the kind of autocracy which had grown up with the rising industry.[4] *The Christian Century* invited Niebuhr to write several articles (see # 3.5n.9) against Henry Ford's labor practices. To his dismay the journal toned his attacks on Ford down to anonymous editorials, which is precisely what Niebuhr at twenty-five did not want. He nevertheless did catch the ear of the Ford Company since Henry Ford's secretary sent a letter to Hartwig, whom she thought might be sympathetic to the Ford Company. It read: "We want to protest against the wholly untrue article on Ford wage policy, written by the pastor of your church. He is no doubt an honest person, but he has fallen in the clutches of the worst anti-Ford journal in the country, *The Christian Century*."[5] After drafting a reply to Ford's secretary, Hartwig asked Niebuhr for his approval to send the letter: "I have consulted with our pastor in regard to his article on the Ford wage policy. He authorizes me to say that if you will furnish him with a list of his inaccuracies, he will be glad to correct them."[6] In Detroit he placed himself among those who spoke for a social gospel, particularly his mentor in Detroit, Episcopal Bishop Charles William, whom Niebuhr "described as a lonely dissenting voice amidst the religious complacency of Detroit. […] Life and interpretation were one for him, united in an unending and unresolved drama." (LRN 102 & 101)

Niebuhr did not only criticize 'outsiders.' The most significant characteristic of his criticism is that he did not refrain from criticizing those closest to him at one time or

[4] NHA 24 and J. Bingham, *Courage to Change* (1972), 113.
[5] "Lessons of the Detroit Experience." CCen 82/16 (April 21, 1965): 488.
[6] "Lessons…", 488.

another in his intellectual journey. Secondly, and equally important, his criticisms were always self-criticisms and dialogues with himself. Therefore, he rarely escaped the temptation of self-deception or self-delusion when giving out critiques, because he knew they were applicable to himself as much as to the individual or group with whom he was debating. (LRN 106)

"To the end of his life Niebuhr remained skeptical of utopian thinkers, who pretended that the possibilities of transcending the national interest were greater than they were" (LRN 108). The reason America had a strong belief in progress, according to Niebuhr, lay in the historical foundations and origins of the United States. "Two perfectionist ideologies had become the primary sources for the democratic movement in America by the seventeenth and eighteenth century: Christian Perfectionism and the Enlightenment. Both ideologies strove toward utopia and believed in the perfectibility of man" (Naveh 2002, 52-53). This may be to a degree true, but Naveh, whatever the intention, makes it sound like Christian perfection was received as the only Gospel preached to Americans. This version of Christianity was spread by Francis Asbury (1745-1816) who responded to John Wesley's call for volunteers to go to America. Asbury's message was traditionally Christian, with this special Wesleyan emphasis on the motto: 'no willful sin after conversion!' This could be seen either as a semantic play on traditional Christianity, or just as bad theology. Charles Finney (1792-1875), originally a Presbyterian Calvinist, became a prominent Second Awakening preacher and a theologian at Oberlin College in Ohio after reading Nathaniel William Taylor (1876-1958) and then reading John Wesley's (1703-1791) *Plain Account of Christian*

Perfection (Noll 1992, 235). Finney emphasized that we cannot choose God without God's preparatory grace and sanctification. His mode of mission was 'the anxious bench.' The European missionaries who came from different countries representing different forms of Christianity or denominations encountered little to no resistance in spreading the Christian Gospel. For sure, these are solid roots for a country to be based in religious utopianism. When they were resisted, it was overcome rather easily with superior weaponry and guile to the indigenous people of North America.

The Social Gospel movement of which Niebuhr became a member in Detroit (1915-1928), he criticized in his years as a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York (1928-1960). This became the longest and most dynamic struggle of his life, perhaps because of the depth to which this motif is ingrained in American culture. From the earliest days of his writing activity the liberal moralism which reached its peak in the 1920s and 1930s, and which continues to inform the American religious outlook, has been the most important issue for him. "Niebuhr's religious profundity and social realism recoiled from this presentation of the gospel and serious social issues" (TRN 43). As Niebuhr's thought gained toughness and clarity and began an all-out assault on the sentimentalist optimism of his day, he was labeled a pessimist. Gordon Harland rightly asserts that such labels as optimist and pessimist are irrelevant for judging Niebuhr's work or that of any other theologian. "But the point to be seen is that this tag was not derived from what he wrote but from the context in which he wrote." (TRN 43)

The root of the sentimentality was the erroneous conception that love is a simple historical possibility. Here we should recall that Dennis P. McCann circumspectly

remembers that the claim for ultimate meaning in liberation theology marks the transition from the ideology to the theological context. "As in the case of Niebuhr's practical theology, there is a complex relationship between the two" (McCann 1981, 149). In the end it is unjust to label Niebuhr a liberation theologian despite his record of fighting for civil rights and against the abuse of power and privilege. Niebuhr escaped utopianism by allowing people to use and abuse power rather than hoping to hand it over only to those who 'deserve' to have power. Niebuhr warned in 1920 that the agonies of World War I proved human happiness to be dependent on conditions of life as well as on personal attitudes, and have taught us that we cannot overcome evil by relying on the inherent goodness of the people. Therefore people are forced to look "for salvation from more than personal limitations; they are seeking redemption from the sins of the world as well as from their own sins."[7] To "those who believe in the kingdom mission of the church in this new social vision of religion,"[8] this is at first blush gratifying, but some rather disappointing characteristics quickly come to the fore: while the church is anxious to be regarded as an agent, not to say the agent, of world salvation it might apply itself very diligently or whole-heartedly to the task, but "its interest in the issues of the day is still dilettantish."[9]

Niebuhr has been accused of lacking an ecclesiology, but this article and others like it, both calling the church to social mission and finding its zealousness wanting or

[7] R. Niebuhr, "The Church and the Industrial Crisis." BW 54 (1920): 588.
[8] R. Niebuhr, "The Church and the Industrial Crisis," 588.
[9] R. Niebuhr, "The Church and the Industrial Crisis," 588.

misguided, are an ecclesiology.[10] Our goal is not to analyze various forms of ecclesiology, but to find in this early article a pastoral note which has an underpinning of practical ethics: "Christian love cannot be satisfied except by an uncompromising application of the principle that 'whosoever would be first among you shall be your servant'".[11] In the sense that every ethic expresses a concern for fellow citizen, is not every ethic 'social'? Niebuhr later defines 'social ethics' in relation to Christian ethic as founded in the New Testament and derived from

> the teachings of the ethical absolutes of the Sermon of the Mount (symbolic of the whole body of Christ's teachings). Such an ethic must be called a social ethic in the sense that it gives guidance in terms of the ultimate possibilities of life and must come to terms with the problem of establishing tolerable harmonies of life on all levels of community set by the fact that men are sinners. […] A 'social ethic' must deal, in short, with the problem of 'alter-egoism,' […] with the fact that a community in which mutual love is the rule may become selfish and turn the love of the individual self into the love of the collective self.[12]

In his journal Niebuhr admitted he could see what brought moderns such fascination with war: it reduces life to simple terms. "The modern man lives in such a complex world that one wonders how his sanity is maintained as well as it is. Every moral venture, every social situation and every practical problem involves a whole series of conflicting loyalties, and a man may never be quite sure that he is right in giving himself to the one as against the other" (LNTC 21). This complex of loyalties always pulling at people - whether aware of it or not - caused Niebuhr to bring politics into the pulpit: "Every religious problem had ethical implications and every ethical problem had

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[10] See also for instance Ach 11-25, LoJ, FaH. - Rahner, writing casually, always has the church and missions in mind (see # 2.2).
[11] R. Niebuhr, "The Church and the Industrial Crisis," 589.
[12] R. Niebuhr, "The Problem of a Protestant Ethics." USQR (1959): 1-2.

some political and economic aspect" (LNTC 28). The issue of revival meetings Niebuhr did not find appealing: "They just don't know enough about life and history to present the problem of the Christian life in its full meaning." He continues:

> If you don't simplify issues you can't arouse emotional crises. It's the melodrama that captivates the crowd. Sober history is seldom melodramatic. God and the devil may be in conflict on the scene of life and history, but a victory follows every defeat and some kind of defeat every victory. The representatives of God are seldom divine and the minions of Satan are never quite diabolical. (LNTC 45)

Religion is a response to life's mysteries and a reverence before the infinitude of the universe. "Without ethical experience the infinite is never defined in ethical terms, but the soul which is reverent and morally vital at the same time learns how to apprehend the infinite in terms of holiness and worships a God who transcends both our knowledge and our conscience." (LNTC 49)

Niebuhr's thought is leading us into several directions. He is already developing a sense for the ambiguities of life: we are incoherent creatures struggling for coherence, but our struggle must not lead us to a too coherent system (see # 2.5). God transcends our knowledge and conscience, so we should realize that the word 'God' is a vague, obscure one. The cathedral "with its dim religious light, its vaulted ceilings, its altar screen, and its hushed whispers is symbolic of the element of mystery in religion" (LNTC 49). If we per chance tour the "attic" of one of these symbolic masterpieces it does not mean, because we look down on the vaults of the ceiling, that we lose all respect for its symbolism. Our perspective then changes, but not the symbolism.

After a communion service, reflecting on the fact that he and his fellow seminarians had such a hard time preaching the Cross, Niebuhr writes: "I don't think I have ever felt greater joy in preaching a sermon. How experience and life change our perspectives!" (LNTC 70) What he once had a hard time understanding as little more than a historical fact, "which proved the necessity of paying a high price for our ideals," he now saw "as a symbol of ultimate reality" (LNTC 70). Two letters received by Niebuhr contrast this discovery. Two young pastors were trying with little gains to awaken congregations to their scholarship. Even though Niebuhr sympathized to some extent, he had no wish to teach that Jesus was just a Galilean dreamer, even if he struggled with orthodox christologies (see # 3.7). And the person who can make no distinction between a necessary symbolism and mythology seems to him no better than the wooden-headed conservative who insists that every bit of religious symbolism and poetry must be accepted literally (LNTC 95). Holding that thought some time later, Niebuhr pontificated: "Fundamentalists have at least one characteristic in common with most scientists: neither can understand that poetic and religious imagination has a way of arriving at truth by giving a clue to the total meaning of things without being in any sense an analytic description of detailed facts." Fundamentalists aver that religion is science and prompt those who know this is not true to declare all religious truth is contrary to scientific fact. He concludes by asking: "How can an age which is so devoid of poetic imagination as ours be truly religious?" (LNTC 114)

Niebuhr, the *Abschiedsredner* of Eden in 1913 and the regular contributor to *The Keryx,* experienced Detroit's nuanced social conditions from within the maelstrom, and

for a time was an editor of *The Christian Century*. Those who used their influence to assure that Niebuhr would come to Union Theological Seminary evidently knew that he could be a prominent figure of their faculty. Sherwood Eddy (1871-1963) brought Niebuhr to President Henry Sloan Coffin (1877-1954), and soon most of the board sided with Eddy and Coffin. On April 23, 1928 Niebuhr resigned as pastor of Bethel Church in Detroit (NHA 34-35). Before he did resign he wrote an article in the *Detroit Times* with the following opening words:

> As the body of knowledge enlarges each scholar must be content to master a relatively smaller and smaller area of it. Nothing will probably be able to stop the general drift toward specialization. […] While this tendency makes for productive and professional efficiency the loss of the spiritual, social, and moral values is tremendous. If we are not careful, we will all develop into a society of undereducated experts who know a great deal about a small area of life itself.[13]

Niebuhr learned and gained an appreciation for the importance of being pastor of a church of eighteen families (in 1915) and of eight-hundred members (in 1928). He taught social life early on. William Chrystal writes that growing up as a "German American in the German Evangelical Synod of North America was both a provincial experience and a visionary one. Niebuhr's early years were spent in rejecting the provincialism while at the same time embracing the visionary" (YRN 40). With his brother Helmut Richard he embraced roots enough to continue working with the Synod. The Niebuhr brothers represented the only two non-faculty members asked to speak at the Eden Centennial.[14]

4.3 Niebuhr and Mystagogy

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[13] R. Niebuhr, "Specialists and Social Life." *Detroit Times* (May 8, 1928): 18.
[14] Elmer J. F. Arndt, ed., *The Heritage of the Reformation: Essays Commemorating the Centennial of Eden Theological Seminary*. New York: Richard B. Smith, 1950.

The fact that Niebuhr's Biblical thought surrounds the "dynamic-dramatic history of creation, fall, salvation and consummation" (KeB 39) is important for his concept of pastoral-practical (social) ethics, which is what Niebuhr developed rather than a theological and/or ideological ethic. Niebuhr welcomed tolerance and also pluralism so long as it was a centred form of pluralism not close to becoming a religiosity that tries to please all people at all times. For someone like Stanley Hauerwas, who has chosen the easy way – namely to be a candle within the wall of the church, this was deemed unfitting for a Christian ethicist and rather a reason to see in Niebuhr a sectarian, which Niebuhr did vehemently denied. Hauwerwas' estimation that grace has not yet found the door to the secular world (see # 2.5) forgets that grace, like the spirit it symbolizes, is effective where ever it will and whenever it will.

Pertinent to our discussion is a reference of James J. Bacik to Gilkey's *Naming the Whirlwind* (1969), [15] particularly the chapters "Ultimacy in Secular Experience I & II." It is worth noting here that Niebuhr's books were "directed neither to the rigid believer nor the rigid unbeliever" (Bingham 1961, 11), but to the uneasy believer or to the troubled doubter. Niebuhr does not speak to those complacent in a form of ultimacy, but to those who are searching for true ultimacy. For Gilkey, the secular concentration on being in the world has led to the limiting conclusion "that the world of discrete, finite objects is all we have to talk about in important experience. […] Secularism's significant

[15] Bacik also names John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977; Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*. New York: Herder & Herder, 1972; Schubert M. Ogden, *The Reality of God and Other Essays.* New York: Harper & Row, 1966; Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology,* vol. 1 (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), 11-15; and David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*. New York: Seabury Press, 1975.

and real areas of experience ignore […] that the ultimate sources of our most intense anxieties are unstructured for us, so that the whole whence of our deepest private and interior fears and the anatomy of our most frantic, foolish, and vicious public behaviour remain in the darkness" (NW 305). Gilkey, in these two chapters, wants to show how within ordinary secular experience what religious language calls ultimacy and seeks to conceptualize does appear, whether we are aware of it, and how many of our interior feelings and anxieties are concerned with it. "If all this is so, then religious symbolism of this range of experience is shown to be both meaningful and necessary if life is to be human" (NW 306). Whether Bacik holds to it or not (he seems to cast a wide net pertaining to who does mystagogy and what mystagogy is), he initially defines a mystagogue "as one who carries out the task of initiating a person into mystery; that is, the apologist [one who communicates the gospel] must become a mystagogue. In general, the apologist must first help people develop a sense of mystery before presenting and defending Christian claims" (ApEm 128n.13). Niebuhr is in line with Bacik's when he writes: "Modern secularism has been an all-pervasive cultural phenomenon since the rise of the empirical scientific disciplines in the seventeenth century. Natural scientists have naturally been skeptical of every theory that transcended natural causes. Empirical historical investigations have also inevitably been negative about the legends with which religions embroidered their symbolic myths" (RS ix). Both Niebuhr and Bacik are concerned about how to help the atheist or the modern secularist to understand that there is meaning also beyond the world to which we already ascribe meaning. This pertains to Christians as well. For instance, fundamentalist literalism - 'orthodoxy' to Niebuhr -

often acknowledges one realm of meaning which excludes the findings of the natural sciences and perceives myth as a story or fable which does not point beyond itself. For Niebuhr, the Christian doctrine of selfhood means that neither the life of the individual self nor the total drama of our existence can be conceived in purely rational terms. (CI 159)

While Gilkey relies on his most influential teachers, Niebuhr and Tillich, for his two chapters "Ultimacy in Secular Experience" in *Naming the Whirlwind*, it is not hard to perceive, as does Bacik, Gilkey's awareness of Rahner:

> Genuine philosophy of religion is a 'fundamental-theological' anthropology of the kind we have tried to pursue in its external outlines. What we are engaged in is anthropology insofar as we are concerned with man. Insofar as we see us as that creature who has to attend in freedom, within his history, to a possible message from the free God, it is theological anthropology. It is 'fundamental-theological' anthropology insofar as this self-understanding which man has of himself is the presupposition for the fact that he is able to hear at all the theology that has actually arisen.[16]

Gilkey uses this in the context of prolegomena that examine different kinds of human experience and prepare for Christian theological discourse by "establishing the meaningfulness of religious discourse in general and in relation to experienced characteristics of human existence in the world, and thus by providing for the meaningful and relevant use of the specifically Christian symbols in a secular age." (NW 413)

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[16] HW 169. - Eine solche 'fundamentaltheologische' Anthropologie, wie wir sie in ihren äußersten Umrissen durchzuführen suchten, ist die eigentliche Religionsphilosophie. Was wir trieben, ist eine Anthropologie insofern wir vom Menschen handelten; ist eine 'theologische' Anthropologie, insofern wir den Menschen begriffen als das Wesen, das in Freiheit in seiner Geschichte auf die mögliche Botschaft des freien Gottes zu horchen hat; sie ist eine 'fundamentaltheologische' Anthropologie, insofern dieses Selbstverständnis, das der Mensch von sich hat, die Voraussetzung dafür ist, daß er die faktisch ergangene Theologie überhaupt zu hören vermag (*Hörer des Wortes*, [München: Kösel-Verlag, 1963], 208 – quoted in NW 414).

This is for Rahner the proper task of the mystagogue: "The priest now, much more than formerly, must be the mystagogue of a personal piety. What is properly spiritual […] has gained a new importance today in the priest's life. He cannot simply feed his flock and let the individual take his chance with them. This happens to an ever decreasing extent" (MePL 149). Christianity must dawn on this individual in an urgent way, this person should experience grace and be sad that other do not share in this grace; and yet "his inner life as a christian must be such that the absence of christianity in his neighbourhood does not appear as a threat" (MePL 150). This might explain why there were followers of Niebuhr called Atheists and why he talked of the 'Hidden Christ,' and Rahner of Anonymous Christianity (more on this # 4.4), although both had correct and yet different explanations of God's self-communication. Neither mitigates, but amplifies, the urgency of missions. For Rahner,

> Human beings today will be believers also in the dimension of their theoretical, conceptual convictions only when they have had and always have anew a religious experience that is really authentic and personal and in which the church is coming to itself. A mere communication of conceptual, categorical teachings of the christian dogma is not enough.[17]

The letter of September 17, 1996, Herbert Vorgrimler wrote to Marmion underlines the importance of Rahner's understanding of mystagogy:

> If one is looking for what he [Rahner] emphasized, then it is mystagogy. This is achieved perhaps through public speech, as I know from my own experience with his preaching. Most of the time, however, mystagogy is really convincing only in

[17] "Der Mensch von heute wird auch in der Dimension seiner theoretischen, satzhaften Überzeugungen nur dann ein Glaubender sein, wenn er eine wirklich echte, persönliche religiöse Erfahrung gemacht hat, immer neu macht und darin die Kirche eingeweiht wird. Eine bloβe Vermittlung satzhafter, kategorialer Lehrsätze des christlichen Dogmas genügt nicht" ("Die grundlenden Imperative für den Selbstvollug der Kirche". In *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie* II/1, 269-70).

> the course of a dialogue. As a pastor, Rahner is privileging first of all the personal ministry. His warnings against sermons in the media supported by all kinds of 'clerical garments' were very serious. He has always looked for what can have bearings, for faith through intellectual honesty instead of through emotions.[18]

No doubt, Niebuhr was – up to a certain point - more hopeful than Rahner about the eventual public *impact* of mystagogy; such impact has never been put into question by Rahner, let alone by Niebuhr himself.

In 1970 Rahner suggested that

> the theology of the future will, in a more direct sense than it previously was, be a missionary and mystagogic theology, and no longer be so willing as has been the case in the past few centuries to consign this department of missionary mystagogy to the realm of personal practice or ascetic and mystical literature. For in the future the Church will no longer be upheld by traditions that are unquestioningly accepted in secular society, or regarded as an integral element of that society. [19]

He adds that "in the unceasing life-and-death struggle within a secularized society it is inevitable that theology should be fully preoccupied with having to raise and answer ever afresh the ultimate questions of a personal decision for God, for Jesus Christ, and (of course in a very derived sense) for the Church" (TI 13, 40). Rather then discuss at length the details of the mystery of the Trinity (as written in former ages) Rahner suggests that theology must be done in a questioning way in which constant contact is maintained with

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[18] "Wenn man bei ihm [Rahner] nach einer Schwerpunktstellung sucht, dann liegt sie bei der Mystagogie. Diese ist viellecht – wie ich aus eigenem Erleben seiner Predigten weiβ – durch ein öffentliches Reden möglich. Meist aber wird sie nur im Gespräch überzeugend sein. Der seelsorger Rahner plädiert primär für Individualseelsorge. Seine Vorbehalte gegen Verkündigung in den Medien durch 'geistliche Kleidung' usw. waren sehr groβ. Immer hat er nach dem Tragfähigen, nach Glauben durch intellectuelle Redlichkeit statt durch Emotionen, gesucht" (CaCR 265). – A similar warning against ‚clerical garments' is to be found also in Niebuhr when he talks about "human vice and error [that] may be clothed by religion in garments of divine magnificence and given the presstige of the absolute" (MMIS 52 quoted in # 1.6).

[19] K. Rahner, "Possible Course for the Theology of the Future," TI 13, 32-60; here TI 13, 40. - First published in Bilanz der Theologie im 20. Jahrhundert III. Eds. H. Vorgrimler & R. van der Gucht (Freiburg, 1970), 530-51. French in Bilan de la théologie du XXe siècle II (Tournai-Paris, 1971), 911-52, and in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 93 (1971) : 3-27. Spanish in *Arbor* 75 (1970 - No. 291): 6-29. Published in German in *Schriften zur Theologie* 10, 32-60 (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1972).

the ultimate questions confronting human beings today. The reason for this is the following:

> 'Mystagogy' means that the *fides quae* of today can be expressed only in a very explicitly recognized unity with the *fides qua*. Obviously it is not the preoccupations of 'modern' man which his own inclinations have fixed upon and determined that provide the criterion for deciding what should be studied in theology. But if it is true that everything expressed in objective concepts in theology has a reference to the interior self-communication of God in every man, then the *fides qua* both can and must constitute a theme in all departments of dogmatic theology and, moreover, from a different aspect according to each department involved. (TI 13, 40-41)

Rahner states that for the sacrament to be more than mere magical rite, the partaker must have faith: "It would be necessary to provide one with instruction and mystagogy in the religious experience of grace in this sense […]" (TI 14, 174). We have already mentioned Rahner's emphasis on anthropology and experience; both are very important also in Niebuhr's preaching and writing activities. For Rahner, the individual's reflection on his or her transcendental "experience of God would admittedly have to be slowly developed in a better way than previously mentioned" (TI 17, 239). "This mystagogy in the self-realisation of the transcendental experience of God must of course links up with experiences which the consciousness declares are clearly and existentially important and which bear in themselves the transcendental experience of God in such a way that they compel the person to a conscious formulation of this experience." (TI 17, 239)

Such a task does take place for Niebuhr mainly with regard to the way to relate to the Bible. For Niebuhr, what he calls "true religion" must – with regard to the incarnation of God in Jesus -

> be conscious of the difficulty and the absurdity of the human claiming kinship with the divine, of the temporal trafficking with the eternal. If the divine is made relevant to the human it must transvalue our values and enter the human at the point where man is lowly rather than proud and where he is weak rather than strong. Therefore I believe that God came in the form of a little child born to humble parents in a manger 'because there was no room for them in the inn.' (Ach 30)

4.4 The Hidden Christ and Anonymous Christianity

"Fear of judgment and hope of mercy are so mingled that despair induces repentance and repentance hope" (ND 2, 109). While Christians believe

> that all truth necessary for such a spiritual experience is mediated only through the revelation in Christ, they must guard against the assumption that only those who know Christ 'after the flesh' [2 Co 5:16], that is, in the actual historical revelation, are capable of such a conversion. A 'hidden Christ' operates in history. And there is always the possibility that those who do not know the historical revelation of Christ may achieve a more genuine repentance and humility than those who do. If this is not kept in mind the Christian faith easily becomes a new vehicle of pride. (ND 2, 109-10n.6)

The hidden Christ is a logical step in Niebuhr's concept of grace; it is expressed in *Nature and Destiny* as fruit of grace (ND 2, 123), and in *Man's Nature and His Communities* (1965) as common grace (see # 4.1). We can trace this thought already in *Reflections on the End of an Era* (1934) where Niebuhr speaks of grace and its meaning for human beings in the following terms: "The experience of grace in religion is the apprehension of the absolute from the perspective of the relative. […] Yet there are glimpses of the eternal and the absolute in human nature" (REnE 281 & 283). From this it is not hard to think that Niebuhr would later express his idea of grace available to all as "the hidden Christ" (see ## 2.3; 3.1; 3.3; 3.7; 4.1; 4.3). According to him, Christians are right to believe that their saving spiritual experience mediated through the historical

revelation in Christ also operates in a hidden way for instance in Hinduism and Buddhism, and they are right also to assume that Christian realism (see # 3.5) and its own view of history retains the Cross as the element of the tragic at the core of both the Christ-event and the human condition and destiny.

Niebuhr carried on a sustained dialogue with secularists documented in writings and publications from 1926 to 1968.[20] Niebuhr came to believe that the "societies of the western world are culturally pluralistic and are influenced by both religious traditions and empirical disciplines" (RNB xii). His early and mature ethics, influenced by the relation of love and justice, coherence and incoherence, in the end agreed with this widening view of the world. We will never experience the perfect love of Jesus in history nor will we know complete justice exacted on those who justly deserve it. In history neither complete suffering love nor complete justice will be realized. Niebuhr never distanced himself from the Bible and its mythical portrayal of "the ambiguity of the human condition, the corruptions of the good and the possibilities of history [as] traced out in the Genesis account, the Babel account, and the death and resurrection of Christ." (Fackre 1970, 95)

At Union Theological Seminary in New York Niebuhr delivered a lecture in St. James Chapel which was taped and distributed under the title "Christian Faith and Humanism" (1952). Along with saying that Christianity shared in the best of Western humanism derived from Plato and Aristotle and the Stoics, "as opposed to

[20] A few highlights of this dialogue are "Our Secularized Civilization." CCen 43/16 (April 22, 1926): 508-10; "The Religious and the Secular." CCen 53/45 (Nov. 4, 1936): 1452-54; "Secularism and Christianity" Mess 13/1 (Jan. 6, 1948): 7; "Foreword" to *The Religious Situation* (Ed. by Donald Cutler. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1968), ix-xv. – See also # 3n.2.

extravagant forms of mysticism and of naturalism," he also said that "it differs from such humanism in its understanding of human self-transcendence, of the uniqueness of the individual self, and of the 'movement of the self in its self-love against the law of love'" (NHA 176). In this lecture Niebuhr recalled the neglected theological doctrine of common grace and defined it as "every security of the natural life that saves us from undue anxiety, every love, and brotherhood that extends beyond our life itself, and every responsibility which draws us beyond ourselves." (NHA 176)

Niebuhr's important ethic of tolerance is based on the fact that all religion and the "most loyal kind of obedience of faith is relative, human and neither divine nor absolute, and probably itself in many ways corrupted" (ON 243). In Protestantism "there is a certain belief in perfectibility which has too often given religious community a sense of self-righteousness; […] this obscures the paradox in Jesus' original teaching; he observed merely that a consistent desire for self-fulfillment was self-defeating" (MaNC 112). Grace is found "in two forms of religious institution and religious faith. It is precisely this common, modern sense of the relativity of all forms of religious institutions and religious faith—inherited from liberalism but made more radical in Niebuhr's thought" (ON 244) – that is effective in Niebuhr's understanding of historical consciousness and in his view of history. The conception of a fulfillment and completion of life by resources not our own prevents Christian ideas of fulfillment by grace from standing in contradiction to the fundamental conviction that human life and history cannot complete themselves, and that "sin is synonymous with abortive efforts to complete them" (ND 2, 99). There is no reason for Christians to

think they have a final answer to anything, let alone a grasp on the absolute. “The gospel truth, which negates and fulfills human wisdom, cannot be claimed as a simple possession.” (ND 2, 230)

The hidden Christ and a grace which is not fully known are akin to Rahner’s idea of God’s self-communication understood sometimes as Jesus Christ and sometimes as grace. We know that Rahner has a thorough program of mystagogy, to which his entire theological thinking leads (see # 4.3). Like Niebuhr’s considerations regarding the hidden Christ and common grace, mystagogy and Rahner’s notion of anonymous Christianity relate. Mystagogy means for Rahner that the church does not entertain a monologue, but a dialogue with the world and thus also with those for whom the experience of God does not matter (TI 21, 9). This is based on the assumption that

> God has communicated himself from the very beginning and where he offers himself to man’s freedom. In the first place a mystagogy (if we may use the term) of the mysticism of ordinary life is necessary; it must be shown that he whom we call God is always present from the very outset and even already accepted, as infinite offer, as silent love, as absolute future, wherever a person is faithful to his conscience and breaks out of the prison walls of his selfishness. With these people such a mystagogy is a necessary presupposition for an understanding of the Church’s worship.” (TI 19, 148-9)

A broad view of grace and a deep view of mystagogy which has to do with the experience of God’s personal grace and the proper communication of mystery did not keep either Niebuhr or Rahner from thinking positively about missions. Rahner believed the theology of the future would be more directly a missionary and mystagogic theology, and be no longer willing as in the past to consign “missionary

mystagogy to the realm of personal practice or ascetic and mystical literature" (TI 13, 40). For Niebuhr also dialogue is the core of Christian mystagogy, and we have already mentioned that he was regularly published not just in Christian, but also in secular magazines and journals. His short but articulate book *The Children of Light and Children of Darkness* (1944) and *The Irony of American History* (1952) were books to secular audiences which contained religious themes as well.

As Maurice Boutin rightly states, "Rahner does not make much of the expression 'anonymous Christianity' [or 'anonymous Christian']. He explicitly mentioned this in 1965 (TI 1, 398), in 1967 (TI 9, 145), in l970 (TI 12, 165), in 1975 (TI 16, 218), and again in 1980 (*Schriften [zur Theologie]* 14, 56). In 1972, he made clear that one might eventually find a better way of expressing what he was trying to say (TI 14, 292), but apparently nobody has so far (TI 14, 281)."[21] While most think he honed this idea during the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), Boutin recalls that Rahner speaks of anonymous Christianity explicitly for the first time in 1960, and that the idea is expressed indirectly and most probably for the first time by him as early as 1950:

> We should take a look at the "Christian pagans," that is at human beings who are close to God without knowing it, but for whom the light is hidden by the shadow that *we* cast. People come from East and West in the Kingdom of God, on roads

[21] M. Boutin, "Anonymous Christianity: A Paradigm for Interreligious Encounter?" JES 20/4 (Fall 1983): 602-29; 607 n. 14. See also Karl-Heinz Weger 1980, 115. – Page 56 referred to above for 1980 is an incidental remark made by Rahner in a public lecture on his *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (FCF) published in 1976 in German. The remark pertains to the two expressions mentioned above, and Rahner says that if one finds they are misinterpreting, or even devaluating, explicit and institutional Christianity "one may avoid to use them. At least according to the Second Vatican Council the subject matter itself cannot be put into question." In fact, throughout the whole FCF these expressions are not being used by Rahner, even in # 6, section 10 on "Jesus Christ in the non-Christian religions".

> that are registered on no official map. When we meet them, they should have the possibility to notice that the official roads we walk on are safer and shorter.[22]

For Boutin, the first explicit use of the expression 'anonymous Christianity' is at the end of the text "Poetry and the Christian" published in 1960 in TI 357-67:

> There is such a thing as a Christianity that is anonymous. There are human beings who merely think they are not Christians, but who are so in the grace of God. Thus it is possible for the individual to be raised to a level of human living which is already imbued with grace even though he or she does not realize it, and even though he or she considers it to be still at the purely human level. We Christians can understand it better than one who is actually in the state to which we refer. We lay down as part of the teaching of our faith that even human morality at the inner-wordly level needs the grade of God in order to be able to maintain itself in its fullness or for any length of time. It is our belief, therefore, precisely as Christians that to achieve this supreme level of human living – wherever it manifests itself in its genuine form, and even when it is found outside the limits of professed and acknowledged Christianity – is a gift of God's grace and a praise to redemption even though the one who has attained to this level is not yet aware of it. Why then should we not love this exalted level of human living when we find it? To remain indifferent to it and to pass it by would be to despise the grace of God itself.[23]

For Rahner, mystagogy and anonymous Christianity are both features of the wideness of God's grace. "Contrary to what is still widely assumed, the notion of 'anonymous Christianity' does not address the so-called non-Christians, and it should be used by Christians only. To what purpose? As a pragmatic notion 'anonymous Christianity' challenges Christians to an openness of mind, attitude, and behavior toward

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[22] "Die heidnischen Christen und die christlichen Heiden—Matth. 8, 1-13" (1950). Published in 1966 in K.Rahner, *Glaube, der die Erde liebt: Christliche Besinnung im Alltag der Welt* (Freiburg: Herder, 1966), 103-4.

[23] TI 4, 357-67; TI 4, 366. – The same paragraph is repeated two years later in K. Rahner, "The Task of the Writer in Relation to Christian Living" (TI 8, 112-29; TI 8, 121). Kevin Smyth (TI 4) and David Bourke (TI 8) translated this paragraph diversely. The English translation offered here is – though inspired by both – Boutin's.

other faiths traditions and worldviews" (Boutin 1983, 602). In 1970 Rahner explains what is meant by 'anonymous Christianity' or 'anonymous Christian:'

> What they signify is nothing else than the fact that according to the doctrine of the Church herself an individual can already be in possession of sanctifying grace, can in other words be justified and sanctified, a child of God, an heir to heaven, positively orientated by grace towards his supernatural and eternal salvation even before he has explicitly embraced a credal statement of the Christian faith and been baptized. What 'anonymous Christianity' signifies first and foremost is that interior grace which forgives man and gives him a share in the Godhead even before baptism. (TI 12,165)

Both Rahner and Niebuhr call for tolerance not only for other denominations and sects, as Niebuhr points out, but also for those among us who we do not even want to be called Christians. This is largely because we have not taken the time to properly weigh the manner in which all human beings do receive God's self-communication. To argue that for Rahner 'anonymous Christianity' is only a theological category and should not interfere with missionary activity is like saying that Niebuhr's social ethics never entered his politics. We are organic thinkers, and our thinking concerns and steers our action. Both Rahner and Niebuhr knew Marxists on friendly terms (for Rahner, see Vas 1985), both saw the flaws in this system (for Niebuhr, see # 2.5); this probably served them in thinking through what they call common or 'practical' grace. (see # 4.1)

Niebuhr touched more destitute people than he could imagine through the popularization of a discarded prayer which became the mantra of the movement 'Alcoholics Anonymous.' Elizabeth Sifton insightfully remarks that the prayer seems old, "for its stringency and spiritual clarity seems unusual for our soupy, compromised times" (Sifton 2003, 9). No matter how it has been recreated, the prayer says: "God, give us the grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, the courage to change the

things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other" (Sifton 2003, 7). Do not make us sifters of those who should be saved from those who should not be bothered worrying about. Let us understand and have a fraction of grace as our own. Rather than holding it intractability as a virtue, allow us to see the gift of a changed and open conscience. If we could see God's face (see # 1.2.5) and understand God's will, then perhaps a closed conscience would be a virtue.

It was with applied Christianity and ethics that Niebuhr was most comfortable, though even Gilkey - among many others! – considered him a theologian. Be it as it may, it might be right to understand him as a 'proto-theologian' since Gilkey understands mythology as a prototype of theology (RSF 103; see 3 see # 1.1) and Niebuhr was deeply involved – albeit critically - in Biblical (uppercase B) mythology. Tillich saw it at work in his colleague at Union Theological Seminary.[24]

4.5 Myth as Communicated Mystagogy

When asked whether the term 'anonymous Christian' meant the end of missionary activity and the ultimate salvation of all human beings, Rahner answered "no" to the first part of the question by saying that "Missionary activity means the further development of the divine life implanted like a seed in 'the pagan,'" and "yes" to the last part of the question: we do have the right to hope that "there is universal salvation which encounters every spiritual person" (FWS 103). The Roman Catholic Church is more liberal than most Protestant churches when it comes to believing how many will be saved. This may be because the Roman Catholic Church understands the idea of common grace better than

[24] MLT 534 & P. Tillich, *What Is Religion?* New York: Harper & Row, 1969.

the Protestant church. There are several variances within the Protestant body, from extreme restrictivism to extreme universalism. Sects, which belong in a sociological class of their own, neither negative nor positive, do not easily fall into any of these positions because of their kinship to mystery religions. Niebuhr prefers to calls a sect "a voluntary and exclusive religious fellowship with standards of faith and conduct different from the general community and therefore conscious of a tension between the Christian ideal and the life of the community." (Ach 34)

Bacik admits that some people for various reasons have a diminished ability to trust the meaning of life and are therefore impervious to the ordinary methods of transcendental mystagogy, and he cites Gilkey as one author who believes that "fundamental trust can be absent or destroyed" (ApEm 128n.16). Gilkey does underline that there might be a real possibility for some to lose confidence in a final coherence, "that the ultimate context of meaning on which their activities depends can crumble, so that despair fanaticism are *real* possibilities in human experience" (NW 354n.30). For Gilkey, the relativism of modern *experience*, which is the main ingredient of modern self-understanding and of secularism, plays a different role in modern *existence*, since

> it points beyond itself to the question of ultimate meaning in which our fragmentary lives find themselves completed and fulfilled. […] But when men become aware, through the relativity of what they do and, through the uncertainties of the historical context within which these activities must function, of all the fragility of their meanings, and stare at this Void, then and only then awareness of an unconditioned context of meaning, of a purpose or *telos* in events that is not fragile and that transcends even what they come to love, can put meaning back into life. And thus arise both the idolatries of secular existence and its own deeper search for the reality of what we call 'God.' (NW 354-5)

According to Bacik, "the Christian apologist today often finds that even the most sophisticated categorical mystagogy is ineffective because the requisite deeper experiences of life are hidden" (ApEm 19). Therefore, "the apologist must become a mystagogue who attempts to bring conscious awareness of these experiences as a preliminary step before speaking of God and Christian doctrines" (ApEm 19). Niebuhr's understanding of myth - with reference not only to Christian symbols, but also for instance to Marxism in *Reflections on the End of an Era* (1934), or to democracy and to responsibility in his interview with Ronald H. Stone in 1969 - illustrates not that the world was created in six days of twenty-four hours, but that God is the ground and fulfillment of history (BeT 9). This is something which elevates beyond doctrine. As he says in *Reflections on the End of an Era*, the only 'philosophy' capable of bringing meaning to history is a mythology, for mythology transcends our finite speech and probably our finite understanding. Is then myth relevant in our scientific age? According to Gilkey, we must understand that all myths do not "represent a primitive form of discourse irrelevant in that form to a mature society" (RSF 66). Permanent elements are to be found in many of the primitive myths with which the modern scientific mind is easily disenchanted. "These symbols are multivalent which speak about both finite things and their relations, *and* the sacred or ultimate manifested in and through them" (RSF 66). Niebuhr entertains a similar thought in 1937:

> The transcendent source of the scientific outlook has supposedly invalidated the value of the primitive myths which portray entities we do not experience in daily life today, different beings which are portrayed in actions and attitudes which partly transcend and partly conform to human limitations. They are regarded as the opulent fruit of an infantile imagination which are bound to wither under the

> sober discipline of a developed intelligence. Science has displaced mythology. (TiM 117)

It is true that science has for the most part displaced religious mythologies it regards as primitive and representative of an infantile imagination, the same one which envisioned God in the thunder, created many fertility gods and goddesses, or refused the idea of monotheism Paul was trying to introduce in Athens (Act of Apostles 17: 22-33). When science got rid of the permanent myth along with the primitive myths, we experienced the same sort of wrongheadedness the church accused Bultmann of for his programme of demythologization. And yet, as Bultmann already suggested in 1928 (later he never dismissed it),

> It is, for instance, possible that insight into human existence is more true at a primitive stage of culture and science than at a more highly developed level. The concept of power, *mana* or *orenda*, which is found in 'primitive' religions, is customarily investigated in scientific accounts on the basis of a particular scientific view of nature and accordingly is explained as a concept of primitive science which has been superseded. Then, for example, statements of the New Testament in which this concept of power plays a role are customarily judged in the same way. But the question we ought to ask is what understanding of human existence finds expression in the concept of *mana*. Obviously (though with the provision that we, too, are speaking from a definite conception of existence) it is the understanding of human life as surrounded by the enigmatic and the uncanny; as at the mercy of nature and of other men. And at the same time the temptation inherent in human life is expressed in this concept, since there appears in it the will to escape from what imprisons man, to make one's self secure by outwitting the enigmatic powers through making them useful to one's self. Perhaps a much truer conception of human existence is expressed there than in the Stoic view of the world or in that of modern science – irrespective of how much more highly developed the science may be in comparison to that of the 'primitive' world.[25]

[25] R. Bultmann, "The Significance of 'Dialectical Theology' for the Scientific Study of the New Testement" (German 1928). In R. Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding* I. New York & Evanston: Harper & Row, 1969, 145-64; 152-3.

Modern human beings require from religion to retreat from its myths because these myths are basically "superstitious, […] nonreferential and subjective" (RSF 69). They do not realize that at the same time modern myths are being created to depict the modern.

In order for secular symbols to bring meaning to the mystery of human existence they must become more than finite myths provided by technology and concerning knowledge of a symbol standing for how to do things. "Most modern anthropocentric myths assert that humans can control their lives through becoming educated, liberal, analyzed, scientific, an 'expert'" (RSF 77). In these myths evil is located outside of knowledge and they create what one might call *gnosis*. In being modern we have embraced ancient cult lore: mythology is as much a part of being a modern as belief in traditional religious myths which are actively eschewed by moderns as pre-scientific and useless. Indeed, every age lives by its own myths.

Niebuhr's goal was to salvage the permanent myth from the surrounding primitive myths. Unfortunately, he met with opposition from the conservative Christians for whom the historicity of these myths was of central importance. But like the historical interpretations of the Beast in the Apocalypse which tend to change with every era, clinging to single historical interpretation of the Creation, the Fall, and the Resurrection becomes more and more embarrassing.

For Niebuhr, mythology is the thread that runs through his thought when he describes for example how he analyses Jesus' thought (REnE 281), or the experience of grace (REnE 292). Paul Lehmann would gladly concede that Niebuhr's christology proceeds mythically so as to include the *in nobis* and the *pro nobis* (see # 3.7). Even in

politics Niebuhr was accused of being a mythmaker because of the way he surveyed the particularities and weighed them with the generalization. Instead, Halliwell rightly thinks of Niebuhr as a demythologizer rather than as a mythmaker (Halliwell 2005, 206). In reality the one presupposes the other, as Niebuhr later came to realize about Bultmann. (see # 1.2.5)

CONCLUSION

The defensive maxim used by Mark Noll (1992) that Niebuhr's reach was very limited has been reiterated in 2007 by Jason Stevens who uses it as one in a long line of reasons to put Niebuhr to rest (bdy2, 136). Noll does not have a grand and limitless reach with his own writings: well read by evangelicals, he is not really read by other people. The most telling line he wrote is still the following one: the "scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind" (Noll 1994, 3). Since this has been written, there has been a continual oscillation on this point but no real progress.

There are better reasons to put Niebuhr into the twilight of more obtuse fare. Social awareness, a part of Niebuhr's dialogue with the social gospellers, is also instrumental to his concern with how people perceive the Christian faith, and especially God. Those who believe humans are capable of gradually becoming better and better, based on the right to educate themselves into the Kingdom of God, are unable to grasp Christian realism's task. They have fallen under the 'ideological taint' that they have become or are becoming the best and the brightest this world has seen and will ever see.

If Niebuhr knew of the existence of a problem, he was an active participant in creatively addressing its solution. This is why his theology is often used by liberation movements. Let us keep in mind what Dennis P. McCann says about the claim for ultimate meaning in liberation theology, namely that it marks the transition from the ideology to the theological context; and he adds: "As in the case of Niebuhr's practical theology, there is a complex relationship between the two" (CRLT 149). In the end it is unjust to label Niebuhr a liberation theologian despite his record of fighting for

civil rights and against the abuse of power and privilege, and although to politicians he was a prophet whose words could be given heed, for instance when he says that

> the most disciplined poor nations achieve a high degree of justice through planning and control. The less disciplined nations provide every luxury for the rich while the poor are in want. […] That is why we have, and will continue to have, little success in commending the 'American way of life' to the rest of the world. We imagine ourselves the keeper of the ark of democratic virtues but the world regards us as the profligate rich man who can afford to be wasteful. (ChSo 14/4 [Fall 1949]: 8-9)

And

> We must observe that when the 'poor' are blessed with historical success and acquire the power of the commissar […] he does not usher in the kingdom of righteousness, but merely presides over a despotism. […] Evidently history solves no problems without creating new ones.[1]

1. Meaning and Mystery

The issue of meaning first appears in *Reflections on the End of an Era* (1934). Niebuhr follows this thought throughout his later writings, as meaning relates to history. Mythology is a central theme for Niebuhr in that it does not diminish but augments meaning. Niebuhr understands mythology as combining the exact data of the scientist with the vision of the artist, which adds religious depth to understanding (REnE 122). One of Niebuhr's central affirmations is that finite principles cannot properly discover that which transcends human being. "The real situation" Niebuhr clarifies is that the human being "who is made in the image of God is unable, precisely because of those qualities in him which are designated as 'image of God,' to be satisfied with a god who is

[1] R. Niebuhr, "Be Not Anxious." Sermon at Memorial Church, Harvard, Oct. 22, 1961; in *Justice and Mercy*. Ed. Ursula Niebuhr (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 80.

made in man's image" (ND 1, 166). When reflecting, in *Man's Nature and His Communities* (1965), on his use of myth in his earlier writings, Niebuhr says he would now prefer the depth of symbolism because symbols are the bearers of "the mystery of human existence" (MaNC 27). Without a penumbra of mystery surrounding meaning, the latter would lose its depth. This is the reason why Niebuhr warned against taking symbols literally and with reference to simply historical events. Creation does not necessarily show us that God is the creator of the world; rather, the myth of creation underscores that God is the ground and fulfillment of our existence. Looking for too much coherence or too obviously final historic meaning in certain biblical narratives invariably reveals the 'ideological taint' of interest, which makes our apprehension of truth something less than truth itself.

When speaking of meaning, no secret or sleight of hand causes knowledge of truth to become equivalent with truth. Thus, "the meaning of life always appears against a background of deep, even infinite mystery. […] A meaning in historical life is never demonstrable, either by science or by rational speculation. All are partial, perspectival, pictures at best of the meaning resident in the mystery of things, in short 'myths'" (ON 56). These partial and perspectival completions allow us to look further at the relation between mystery and meaning. Niebuhr explains that God is not pure mystery, but is made known: God's "sovereignty over history is disclosed in specific events and acts which are revelatory of the meaning of the whole process. But these revelations of sovereignty presuppose the divine power over the whole created world; and in the

Biblical idea of the world's creation by God the emphasis is upon mystery. It calls attention to a depth of reality where mystery impinges upon meaning." (FaH 46)

Niebuhr acknowledges that all mystery will be resolved in the perfect knowledge of God. Faith in a religion of revelation is distinguished on the one side from merely poetic appreciations of mystery, and on the other side from philosophies of religion which find the idea of revelation meaningless. The problem with the attempt to solve rationally the enigma of existence is that we are involved in the enigma we are trying to comprehend (DST 172). For Rahner, with whom we have placed Niebuhr in dialogue, the hidden God does not become comprehensible even in revelation (TI 16, 233-4). And yet, both Niebuhr and Rahner knew the importance of referring to God in symbolic language because of our inability to comprehend God.

2. Method

Students of Niebuhr dispute whether he is a theologian, an ethicist, a political analyst, or simply a philosopher; such a dispute reveals more about an interpreter of Niebuhr than about Niebuhr himself. They also debate over whether he was a neo-orthodox (Gilkey), a neoliberal (Dorrien), a post-liberal (Macquarrie), or rather a creative liberal thinker (Harland). Gilkey does make a good argument in favor of neo-orthodoxy, but Nathan A. Scott Jr. follows Niebuhr's own thought and concludes that Niebuhr indulges in journalistic jargon. Niebuhr mentions that he could be comfortable with neo-orthodoxy until he saw it turning into a sterile orthodoxy and therefore found himself a liberal at heart.

Dialectical theology is that mode of thinking which defends the paradoxical character of faith over against the speculations of reason and vindicates the former against the latter. There must be a 'yes' and a 'no', and it is ironic that although Niebuhr does not fit into the classic definition of a dialectical theologian, he sustains this 'yes' and 'no', while Karl Barth, a noted dialectical theologian, has a more propositional than dialectical 'yes' and 'no' in his theology (Tillich 1935, 127; see RNA 41). Barth's specification of God as the Wholly Other makes knowledge of God impossible for humans; all knowledge is initiated by God through revelation of his Son Jesus Christ whom some inexplicably reject. Barth's *caveat* regarding rejection is excusable because there has been no conversation, no real communication with the people God wants to bring to salvation, and hence no real knowledge of what they are rejecting. A fine explanation of the dialectical method used by Barth is given by John C. Bennett: "There is a living dialectic in his thought which seems to grow naturally out of polemics. He is often much clearer in showing what is wrong with many positions than he is in giving content to his own position; or rather, we often have to infer this content from his criticisms of those who are in conflict with each other." (in PVT 60)

The Niebuhr brothers, H. Richard and Reinhold, were children of the Social Gospel movement. Reinhold witnessed first hand the effects Henry Ford's new automobile production line had on his congregation members while a pastor in Detroit. He fought for social justice, and what he found wanting about the Social Gospel movement and several of its exponents was their "strikingly naïve" social posture (InCE 173). The two Niebuhr brothers did offer at once a sound critique of this sentimental

vision of the Social Gospel and a correction of its vision of human nature which all but forgot about sin. This early phase of the Social Gospel (see SoG 285) was not done in by these critiques; it was finally forcefully overwhelmed by humanity's "downward" tendency. While Niebuhr and Rauschenbusch did share a common vision of humanity, Niebuhr's Christian realism and especially his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) did not endear him to Social Gospel advocates.

According to Harland, Christian Realism "is the label which best describes Niebuhr's social and political thought. […] Niebuhr was a realist but he was a Christian realist, and that meant he was continually showing how the Christian understanding could widen the American policy" (Harland 1994, 118). Theology is always born of a context, and Niebuhr's Christian realism likewise is a response to the prevailing thought of the time – namely the possibility of unmitigated human progress ironically given impetus by Darwin's theory of evolution. Niebuhr was in the midst of developing a distinct perspective in his "understanding of human nature and social realities, relating biblical faith to politics and culture while distinguishing between it and those realms, in apprehending mystery and meaning in human experience and in the pinnacles of Christian faith, and facing the perplexities of life and history without illusions or despair" (NHA 3). Good captures Christian realism in its essence by noting it is not so much a system of thought, "but a cast of mind. It is a complex of perspectives that, for Niebuhr, have been biblically derived and validated by experience." (Good 1961, 265)

The crux of Niebuhr's method may be his Christian realism, from where we can attempt to understand how he viewed anthropology, christology, and sociology. The

hidden Christ cannot really be placed at the center of his theological method, though it does have a significant place in his notion of common grace. This is also how he moved through the world of politics. It did give him a situational perspective; this is why he did not become over wrought with consistency but moved instead from Marxism as the most appropriate way to practice Christianity to a liberal Christian who was critical of Marxism. Regarding international relations also, Niebuhr changed his mind from a pacifist stance during World War I, to advocating that the United States forego their isolationist foreign policy and become actively engaged in World War II.

Niebuhr scholars have posed different centers to his thought. Lehmann and Harland, as we have seen, argue that christology is this center. Lehmann follows Niebuhr's christological thought from *Does Civilization Need Religion?* (1927) to *Faith and History* (1949). In 1927 Niebuhr had a 'low' christology which by 1949 had become a 'higher' christology. Lehmann makes an interesting argument about Niebuhr's so-called mythical christology which moves from the transcendental reality of *Christus in nobis* to the transforming power of *Christus pro nobis* (Lehmann in KeB 255). All this, even though Niebuhr at the period of his supposedly 'low' christology in *Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (1929) stated: "[…] I can no more reduce Jesus to a mere Galilean dreamer and teacher than I can accept the Orthodox Christologies." (LNTC 95)

Durkin notes that because Niebuhr's interests were diffuse, a center is not easily found. The center of Niebuhr's theology is not "Christology or anthropology or the concept of the hidden God as critics often infer. Its centre is, in a sense, sociological in that the experience of a social group becomes the norm for interpreting all experience"

(RN 79). This study has illustrated that mythology is for Niebuhr the binding theme through the several approaches he employs to illustrate the importance of meaning and mystery for mystagogy.

3. Mystagogy

Niebuhr did not utilize the expression 'mystagogical theology,' although he was really someone who did initiate others into mystery – namely the mystery of simply being human, which brings people to re-examine their thoughts concerning God. He said that "Christian apologists cannot hope for too much success" and that "it has become progressively clearer in my mind, since I wrote several books on what line the apologetic venture of the Christian Church should take" (KeB 20). Niebuhr wrote Billy Graham about his evangelical perfectionist tactics and his lack of social justice. Meaning as Niebuhr's central theme can be found in his theology of grace as "the acknowledgment that nature and history possess meaning" (RN 72) because in these two realms God is revealed (REnE 285). "The experience of grace has been stereotyped by religious orthodoxy and made to depend on the dispensations of religious institutions, the acceptance of dogmas, and faith in its efficacy in specific facts of history." (REnE 286-7)

Religious faith needs specific symbols, and Niebuhr understands the Jesus of history as a 'perfect' symbol of the absolute in history because aspiration to perfect love is realized in the life of Jesus and the human drama of the Cross. In fact, the experience of grace can be expressed in mythological terms if and when this does not become a peril to the ethical life. "For only in the concepts of religious myth can an imperfect world mirror the purposes of a divine Creator and can the mercy of God make the fact of sin

and imperfection bearable without destroying moral responsibility for the evil of imperfection or obscuring its realities in actual history." (REnE 292)

4. The Detroit Experience

Niebuhr was thrust into the ministry after schooling at Elmhurst (1913), a weak version of the German gymnasium: it was a school which was poor in Latin and English. From 1913 on he went to his father's alma mater, Eden Theological Seminary, but he found it was more of the same. At Eden he met Samuel D. Press who will be influential in his life and help him to imagine the possibility of a ministry that would transcend the social and cultural confines of the Midwest German Synod. Press may have been responsible for Niebuhr's appointment as pastor at Bethel Church in Detroit in 1915.

The fact that Niebuhr's Biblical thought surrounds the "dynamic-dramatic history of creation, fall, salvation and consummation" (KeB 39) is important for his concept of pastoral-practical (social) ethics, which is what Niebuhr developed rather than a theological and/or ideological ethic. Niebuhr welcomed tolerance so long as it was a centered form of pluralism not close to becoming a religiosity that tries to please all people at all times. The mystagogical task of the transcendental experience of God does take place for Niebuhr mainly with regard to the way one relates to the Bible. For Niebuhr, what he calls 'true religion' must - with regard to the incarnation of God in Jesus -

> be conscious of the difficulty and the absurdity of the human claiming kinship with the divine, of the temporal trafficking with the eternal. If the divine is made relevant to the human it must transvalue our values and enter the human at the point where man is lowly rather than proud and where he is weak rather than strong. Therefore I believe that God came in the form of a little child born to

> humble parents in a manger 'because there was no room for them in the inn.' (Ach 30)

A broad view of grace and a deep view of mystagogy which has to do with the experience of God's personal grace and the proper communication of mystery did not keep either Niebuhr or Rahner from thinking positively about missions. Rahner believed the theology of the future would be more directly a missionary and mystagogic theology, and be no longer willing as in the past to consign "missionary mystagogy to the realm of personal practice or ascetic and mystical literature" (TI 13, 40). For Niebuhr also dialogue is the core of Christian mystagogy, and we have already mentioned that he was regularly published not just in Christian, but also in secular magazines and journals.

Niebuhr's goal was to salvage the permanent myth from the surrounding primitive myths. Unfortunately, he met with opposition from the conservative Christians for whom the historicity of these myths was of central importance. But like the historical interpretations of the Beast in the Apocalypse which tend to change with every era, clinging to a single historical interpretation of the Creation, the Fall, and the Resurrection becomes more and more embarrassing.

For Niebuhr, mythology is the thread that runs through his thought when he describes either how Jesus thought (REnE 281) or the experience of grace (REnE 292). Even in politics Niebuhr was accused of being a mythmaker because of the way he surveyed the particularities and weighed them with the generalization. Instead, Halliwell rightly thinks of Niebuhr as a demythologizer rather than as a mythmaker (Halliwell 2005, 206). In reality the one presupposes the other, as Niebuhr later came to realize about Bultmann.

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