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REINHOLD NIEBUHR, SIN AND CONTEXTUALITY: A RE-EVALUATION OF THE FEMINIST CRITIQUE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis comprises a re-evaluation of the feminist theological critique, as given by Valerie Saiving, Judith Plaskow, Daphne Hampson and Susan Nelson Dunfee, of Reinhold Niebuhr's doctrine of sin. The re-evaluation proceeds from a contextual interpretation of Niebuhr's theology in general and a contextual reading of his doctrine of sin in particular. My argument is that Niebuhr is deliberately and consistently a contextual theologian. I locate his contextual methodology in the open-ended approach of Christian realism.

The feminist critique is based on the assumption that Niebuhr universally defines *the* primary sin as pride. It is argued that pride is in fact a distinctly male characteristic, and, while quite plausibly the primary sin for men, is clearly *not* the primary sin for women. Niebuhr is guilty, that is, of confusing male reality with human reality in the doctrine. Saiving and Plaskow then develop a definition of women's sin which they correspond with Niebuhr's sin of sensuality. This type of sin, rather than being self-aggrandizing, is characterized by inordinate and destructive self-effacement. Their subsidiary argument is that Niebuhr erroneously treats sensuality, which should be equal but opposite to pride, as a secondary form of sin.

My argument in this thesis is that the critique, because it fails to take into account the contextual nature of Niebuhr's theology (and by extension, his doctrine of sin), rests on a mistaken assumption about the universality of his claim. Niebuhr's concerns were with the powerful. The contextual claim that pride is the primary form of sin in those who are *empowered* is being mistaken for a claim that pride is the primary sin for all people, regardless of gender or context. My subsidiary argument is that the correlation of *women's sin* with Niebuhr's understanding of sensuality is mistaken. What the feminists refer to as women's sin is in fact not sin at all for Niebuhr but evidence of injustice.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette thèse est une réévaluation de la critique féministe théologique, donnée par Valerie Saiving, Judith Plaskow, Daphne Hampson et Susan Nelson Dunfee, au sujet de la doctrine de Reinhold Niebuhr sur les péchés. Cette réévaluation provient de l'interprétation contextuelle, en général, de la théologie de Niebuhr et, en particulier, d'une lecture contextuelle de sa doctrine. Je soutiendrai que Niebuhr est délibérément, et sans exception, un théologien contextuel. Je place sa méthodologie dans une approche illimitée du réalisme chrétien.

La critique féministe est basée sur la supposition que Niebuhr définit l'orgueil comme le péché capital de façon "universelle." Leur critique repose sur le fait que l'orgueil est une distinction typiquement masculine du péché et que, tout en étant plausible qu'il le soit chez les hommes, il ne l'est en aucun cas chez les femmes. La faute de Niebuhr serait donc de confondre, dans sa doctrine, la réalité masculine avec celle de l'humanité. Saiving et Plaskow développent ensuite une définition du péché féminin qu'elles associent au péché de la sensualité défini par Niebuhr. Ce type de péché, plutôt que d'être autoglorifiant, est caractérisé, selon elles, par une modestie démesurée et destructive. Elles soutiennent également que Niebuhr traite, de façon incorrecte, le péché de sensualité qui devrait être considéré comme l'équivalent, bien qu'à l'opposé du péché d'orgueil, et non comme un péché secondaire.

Je soutiendrai dans ma thèse que cette critique, parce qu'elle n'a pas su prendre en compte la nature contextuelle de la théologie de Niebuhr, s'est développée sur l'hypothèse erronée d'un prétendu "universalisme" de sa doctrine.

Niebuhr s'adressait aux gens de pouvoir. Or le fait qu'il déclare l'orgueil comme péché capital de ces "gens là" a été interprété par la critique féministe comme si il l'était de tous, sans regard de sexe ou de contexte.

Je soutiendrai encore que la corrélation émise par la critique féministe entre la pensée de Niebuhr à propos du péché de sensualité et ce qu'elle appelle le "péché des femmes" est faux. Ce que les féministes attribuent au "péché des femmes" n'est en aucun cas un péché pour Niebuhr, mais simplement une preuve d'injustice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my deep gratitude to Dr. Douglas John Hall for his consistent and unerring guidance in the preparation of this thesis. I am also greatly indebted to Samieun Khan for her help in preparing the manuscript, and to Marina Costain for her assistance in its submission.

This thesis is dedicated to my father.

INTRODUCTION

The theology of Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) has generated, and continues to generate, a great deal of commentary, discussion and debate among contemporary theologians. Interpretations of his work are myriad and diverse; at times complementary, often contradictory.

Perhaps the most consistent and united critique has issued from feminist theologians who object to Niebuhr's doctrines of sin and grace.[1] These theologians, represented principally by Valerie Saiving, Judith Plaskow, Daphne Hampson and Susan Nelson Dunfee,[2] argue that Niebuhr's understanding of sin, although intended as a universal description of the human condition, has little or no relevance to women or women's experience.

Valerie Saiving, for example, who was the first to examine Niebuhr's doctrine from a feminist perspective, finds that Niebuhr's conception of sin "represents a widespread tendency in contemporary theology to describe man's predicament as rising from his separateness and the anxiety occasioned by it and to identify sin with self-assertion and love with selflessness."[3] Women suffer more consistently, she argues, from underdevelopment of self. Thus Niebuhr's argument that pride is the primary form of sin betrays an

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[1] These doctrines are elaborated most thoroughly in his two-volume work, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, which was based on his Gifford lectures delivered at Edinburgh in 1939. Volume I: *Human Nature* (New York: Scribner's, 1941); Volume II: *Human Destiny* (New York: Scribner's, 1943). Reprinted 1964. Hereafter: NDI, NDII.

[2] Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *The Journal of Religion*, Volume LX, Number 2 (April 1960), pp. 100-112. Hereafter: Saiving. Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Lanham, MD.:University Press of America, 1980). Hereafter: Plaskow. Daphne Hampson, "Reinhold Niebuhr on Sin: A Critique," *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time*, ed. Richard Harries (London and Oxford: Mowbray, 1986) pp. 46-60. Hereafter: Hampson. Susan Nelson Dunfee, "The Sin of Hiding: A Feminist Critique of Reinhold Niebuhr's Account of the Sin of Pride," *Soundings* 65, Fall 1982, pp. 316-327. Hereafter: Nelson Dunfee.

[3] Saiving, p. 100.

exclusively male analysis.[4] Judith Plaskow extends the critique by arguing against Niebuhr's claim that the sin of sensuality is essentially derivative of the sin of pride.[5] By making sensuality secondary, Niebuhr fails to recognize the seriousness of self-loss.

I intend in this thesis to argue that Niebuhr's theology is deliberately and consistently contextual, and to examine the implications of such a contextual reading for (i) Niebuhr's understanding of sin and (ii) the feminist critique of Niebuhr's understanding of sin.[6] More specifically, I wish to argue that if Niebuhr's theology is in fact contextually oriented, which by extension contextually influences his understanding of sin, then the feminist critique could be resting on a mistaken assumption about the universality of his claim. The contextual claim that pride is a primary form of sin in already realized or empowered selves may be being inaccurately read by feminist critics as a claim that sin is primarily pride for all people, regardless of gender or context. The repercussions of both the possible misreading and the alternative contextual reading will be analyzed and discussed.

The thesis will be divided into six parts. In **Chapter 1**, I will discuss in detail the feminist interpretation of Niebuhr's doctrine of sin. In **Chapter 2**, I will rehearse the critique which is based on this interpretation. In **Chapter 3**, I will define what I mean by *contextuality* in theology. In **Chapter 4**, I will demonstrate the contextuality of Niebuhr's theology by examining his methodology. In **Chapter 5**, I will give a contextual reading of Niebuhr's doctrine of sin. In **Chapter 6**, I will discuss the implications of this contextual reading for the feminist critique.

I have three broad objectives in this thesis. The first is to make an explicit argument for the contextual nature of Niebuhr's theology, which to my knowledge has not yet been attempted in detail. Second, I wish to show that Niebuhr's conception of sin can be read equally plausibly as contextual, and so is not necessarily intended as the universal

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[4] See Saiving, pp. 108-109.

[5] Plaskow, p. 62.

[6] Space prevents me from detailed examination of the ancillary criticism of Niebuhr's doctrine of grace. I will briefly discuss the repercussions of a contextual reading of the doctrine of sin on grace and its critique in chapter 6.

description of the human condition assumed by Saiving, Nelson Dunfee, Hampson and Plaskow. Third, I want to explore the repercussions of a contextual understanding of Niebuhr's conception of sin for the feminist position. Rather than simply making a critique of a critique, which has limited relevance, I want to reintroduce the possibility that feminist theological analysis can *draw on* Niebuhr's conception of sin, rather than having to, as has thus far been the case, reject it as irrelevant to women.

CHAPTER I

NIEBUHR'S DOCTRINE OF SIN: THE FEMINIST INTERPRETATION

Niebuhr's analysis of human nature, sin and grace is elaborated most extensively in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Here he seeks to expound a Christian interpretation of the human condition by comparing it with other Western interpretations:[7] the classical, which comprises versions of idealism and naturalism; and the modern, which comprises a proliferation of views based on (i) the classical, (ii) the Biblical or Hebraic and (iii) "distinctly modern motifs."[8] This comparison is effected through Niebuhr's attempt to trace two major themes in Western culture--a sense of individuality and the assumption that history is meaningful--through their myriad historical manifestations back to the Hebraic Biblical faith in which he believes they are rooted.[9]

One of the most notorious theses to emerge from Niebuhr's analysis of human nature is his conception of, and perceived emphasis on, sin.[10] In section 1 of this chapter I will briefly describe Niebuhr's general conception of human nature, as a basic knowledge of it is necessary to fully comprehend the doctrine.[11] In section 2, I will discuss in detail the feminist interpretation of Niebuhr's conception of sin.

1.1) Human Nature: A Sketch

For Niebuhr, humans are both freedom (or 'spirit') and finitude (or 'nature'):

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[7] See NDI, pp. 5-9.

[8] NDI, p. 18.

[9] NDI, p. vii.

[10] *Time Magazine*'s review of NDI, "Sin Rediscovered," claimed: "The religious book-of-the-year was published last week and it puts sin right back in the spotlight." Richard W. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 201.

[11] Detailed treatment of Niebuhr's anthropology is beyond the scope of this paper.

> The obvious fact is that man is a child of nature, subject to its vicissitudes, compelled by its necessities, driven by its impulses, and confined within the brevity of the years which nature permits its varied organic form, allowing them some, but not too much, latitude. The other less obvious fact is that man is a spirit who stands outside of nature, life, himself, his reason and the world.[12]

The errors of all Western philosophies of human nature arise from one of the following: (i) erroneous definitions of these two dimensions; (ii) overemphasis on one dimension at the expense of the other; (iii) failure to recognize the essential integration or unity of these dimensions in the individual; or (iv) various combinations of the above three inaccuracies.[13]

Classical idealism, for example, identifies *spirit* with reason and the good and *nature* with ignorance and evil.[14] Classical naturalism, on the other hand, interprets humans as "wholly a part of nature" and denies the dimension of spirit altogether.[15] Modern culture, which inherits the emphases of classical philosophy,[16] combines contradictory characteristics of idealism and naturalism simultaneously. Capitalism, for example, allows humans to exploit nature but assumes that nature's "pre-established harmonies"[17] will provide an intrinsic check against abuse; Marxism, conversely, interprets human nature in materialist terms but envisions an ultimate society based on thoroughly rational principles.[18]

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[12] NDI, p. 3.

[13] See NDI, chapters I-III, esp. chapter III and sections II and IV of chapter I.

[14] NDI, p. 7.

[15] NDI, p. 9.

[16] NDI, p. 18.

[17] NDI, p. 20.

[18] NDI, p. 21.

In the Christian view, although composed of spirit and nature, humans are not dual but integrated, as well as thoroughly individual and unique. Niebuhr attributes this unified individuality to the ultimate presuppositions of Christian faith. First, "Christian faith in God as the creator of the world transcends the canons and antinomies of rationality, particularly the antinomy between mind and matter, between consciousness and extension."[19] Second, that humans are 'made in the image of God' means that they are "understood primarily from the standpoint of God."[20]

The first presupposition affirms that because God "is the source of all existence,"[21] a finite, created unity characterizes the individual: "Man is, according to the Biblical view, a created and finite existence in both body and spirit."[22] Spirit and nature are entirely integrated. Moreover, because God is Creator, the world, because created by God, is good.[23] Thus nature cannot be equated with evil.[24] The second presupposition is the source of both (i) the definition of 'spirit' and (ii) individuality.[25]

(i) Because humans are made in the image of God, they are understood from the perspective of God and so cannot fully realize, comprehend, or define themselves within the boundaries or confines of creation. The self is conscious but can also be self-conscious; it "knows the world, insofar as it knows the world, because it stands outside both itself and the world, which means that it cannot understand itself except as it is understood from beyond itself and the world."[26] Thus "what Christianity knows as 'spirit'"[27] includes, but

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[19] NDI, p. 12.

[20] NDI, p. 13.

[21] NDI, p. 12.

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] NDI, pp. 12-13.

[24] NDI, p. 12.

[25] NDI, pp. 13-15.

[26] NDI, p. 14.

is more than, rationality. It is essentially freedom, or the self's capacity for self-transcendence.[28]

(ii) The recognition that spirit is freedom is an aspect of general revelation: "any astute analysis of the human situation must lead to it."[29] But for the self to shift from recognition of its "essential homelessness"[30] to comprehension of itself, it requires special revelation. That is, without special revelation, because consideration is solely from the limited human perspective, definition of any transcendent ground of existence can only be negative. Particularity or individuality is therefore always lost at the transcendent level.[31] It is the special revelation of God's historical self-disclosure in Christianity, as a prophetic religion, which conveys the true meaning of individuals as individuals. "Christian faith in God's self-disclosure, culminating in the revelation of Christ, is thus the basis of the Christian concept of personality and individuality."[32]

Yet Christianity's emphasis on the uniqueness and unity which characterize human nature is accompanied, Niebuhr stresses, by an equally weighty emphasis on the seriousness of human evil[33] or sin.

1.2) The Feminist Interpretation

Judith Plaskow describes the "occasion for sin" in Niebuhr's analysis as "nothing less than human nature itself."[34] That is, innate to the paradoxical structure of human nature

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[27] *Ibid.*

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] NDI, p. 15.

[30] NDI, p. 14.

[31] NDI, pp. 14-15. See chapter III of NDI for extended discussion of this point.

[32] NDI, p. 15. See chapter VI of NDI for extended discussion of this point.

[33] NDI, pp. 16-17.

[34] Plaskow, p. 54.

(as "creaturely freedom"[35]) is a capacity for sin. More specifically, because sin for Niebuhr is deliberate or willed,[36] to become actual it requires the freedom or agency which characterizes the dimension of spirit.[37]

But this freedom is equally creative of good: it is what distinguishes humans from nature in a constructive *as well as* a destructive sense.[38] "The extension of human sovereignty is thus always an extension of the possibilities for good and for evil."[39] Therefore, although the structure of human nature is sufficient to explain the *capacity* for sinfulness, it cannot, in and of itself, account for or transform this potential into the actuality of sin.

i) The precondition of sin

Because humans are dual, they are in conflict.[40] The self is anxious because the dimension of spirit recognizes itself as distinct from, but nevertheless bound to, nature:

> Involved as the self is in the natural order, limited by it in every respect, in its freedom it knows itself as bound and limited. It is therefore anxious.[41]

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[35] *Ibid.*, p. 56.

[36] Aurelia Takacs Fule, "Being Human Before God: Reinhold Niebuhr in Feminist Mirrors," *Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971): A Centenary Appraisal*, eds. D. Hall & G. Gaudin (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994.), p. 56.

[37] Plaskow, p. 56.

[38] Saiving, p. 100.

[39] Plaskow, p. 56.

[40] Hampson, p. 46.

[41] Plaskow, p. 56. See also Saiving, p. 100.

Anxiety thus springs from duality; it is "an 'inevitable concomitant' of human nature."[42] It is what, finally, leads the individual into sin.[43]

ii) The actuality of sin

Because sin is essentially the spirit's response to anxiety about finitude, it's primary form springs from a deliberate attempt to *obscure* that finitude--to deny it. Sin "is never the mere ignorance of...ignorance."[44] Put in another way, the primary form of sin is pride:

> Sin is the self's attempt to overcome that anxiety by magnifying its own power, righteousness, or knowledge. Man knows that he is merely part of the whole, but he tries to convince himself and others that he *is* the whole. He tries, in fact, to become the whole.[45]

Pride takes three forms: of power, of knowledge and of virtue.[46] The consummate example of moral pride is spiritual pride, where "the self-deification implied in moral pride becomes explicit";[47] this is also the "quintessential" example of pride in general.[48] After this initial response to anxiety, however, sin can also take another form, which involves denial

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[42] Plaskow, p. 56, paraphrasing Niebuhr, NDI, chapter 7, section II, p. 182.

[43] Because anxiety can also lead to creativity, Niebuhr, as Plaskow correctly recognizes, posits an external precondition for sin--which is symbolized in Christianity by the devil--to go along with anxiety as sin's internal precondition. See the section on "Temptation and Sin" in chapter VII of NDI (pp. 179-186); and pp. 56-57 in Plaskow.

[44] Niebuhr, NDI, p. 181.

[45] Saiving, p. 100.

[46] Plaskow, p. 58. See also Niebuhr, NDI, chapter VII, section III (pp. 186-203).

[47] Plaskow, p. 59.

[48] *Ibid.*

of the freedom inherent in the dimension of spirit. This is what Niebuhr refers to as the sin of sensuality:

> Niebuhr also comments, though he hardly analyzes this, that another way of reacting to anxiety than in pride is in sensuality; forgetting that he has a spirit, man attempts to bury himself in the natural world.[49]

Sensuality is both "becoming lost in the detailed processes, activities, and interests of existence"[50] and "undue identification with and devotion to particular impulses and desires within the self."[51] But it always results from a prior attempt to obscure finitude; it "always succeeds an abortive attempt at domination."[52] That is, sensuality invariably *follows* pride: the sensual self embraces nature because it cannot transcend it. Sensuality is thus a secondary form of sin for Niebuhr:

> One of the most prominent features of Niebuhr's doctrine of sin is his insistence on the primacy of the sin of pride and the derivative character of sensuality.[53]

To sum up: the capacity for sin is inherent in human nature in the dimension of spirit; something else is required to actualize sin and this precondition is anxiety; the primary form of actualized sin is pride; sensuality is a secondary form of sin because it is derivative of or subordinate to pride.

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[49] Hampson, p. 47.

[50] Niebuhr, NDI, p. 185, as quoted in Plaskow, p. 60.

[51] Niebuhr, NDI, p. 228, as quoted in Plaskow, p. 61.

[52] Niebuhr, NDI, p. 179, as quoted in Plaskow, p. 62.

[53] Plaskow, p. 58.

CHAPTER II
THE FEMINIST CRITIQUE

Central to the feminist critique of Niebuhr's doctrine of sin is the issue of universality. The theologians I am considering here are not arguing that Niebuhr's conception of pride is *in itself* erroneous. They are, rather, arguing that women's experience clearly demonstrates that pride is *not* the primary sin for women. This by extension means that it is not the primary sin for humanity in general.[54]

Further, pride as described by Niebuhr is a characteristically masculine dilemma. By making pride primary, Niebuhr is guilty of conflating 'male' and 'human'--and in more than a simple linguistic sense. Plaskow argues specifically that the primacy of pride in Niebuhr's analysis is an *a priori* assumption rather than a backed-up claim.[55] It is principally this mistaken assumption that all seek to expose:

Hampson:

> I am not faulting Niebuhr's analysis. It is surely illuminating. I am simply saying that it is a description of what is a peculiarly male temptation... My criticism is of Niebuhr's equation of male with human.[56]

Plaskow:

> I also do not wish to argue that the experiences on which Niebuhr and Tillich concentrate are not important human experiences or that they are not shared by women. I am attacking the universality of their claims. The two men do not define sin and grace for all people in all times or even for their generation.[57]

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[54] See Hampson, p. 47; Nelson Dunfee, p. 321; Plaskow, p. 6 and Saiving, p. 101.

[55] Plaskow, p. 62.

[56] Hampson, p. 47.

[57] Plaskow, p. 6.

Saiving:

> It is my contention that there are significant differences between masculine and feminine experience and that feminine experience reveals in a more emphatic fashion certain aspects of the human situation which are present but less obvious in the experience of men. Contemporary theological doctrines....view the human condition from the male standpoint.[58]

Nelson Dunfee:

> For, as long as theology focuses on the sin of pride, as long as it uplifts the one virtue of self-sacrificial love, as long as it worships a judgmental Father in the sky who demands self-sacrifice.... the full humanity of women will continue to be sacrificed on the cross of self-sacrifice.[59]

The critique of Niebuhr's analysis has three parts. First, the universality of his claim is rejected: women's experience is described to show that women are, in general, not susceptible to pride. It is then shown that pride as Niebuhr describes it is a characteristically male temptation. Second, a definition of women's sin is developed, which is distinct from but equal to pride, and which corresponds more to what Niebuhr refers to as the sin of sensuality. Third, Niebuhr's conception of sensuality is critiqued for being underdeveloped.

2.1) Women's experience

Saiving uses Margaret Mead's *Male and Female* as a basis for her discussion of the differences between men's and women's experience.[60] She describes the complex and ambiguous relationship between cultural constructs and biological differences and then analyzes how these work to determine gender characteristics.

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[58] Saiving, p. 101.

[59] Nelson Dunfee, p. 324.

[60] Saiving, p. 103.

That women bear and nurse children, for example, means that they are close to their infants in a way that fathers are not.[61] This intense relationship, she argues, "plays the first and perhaps the most important role in the formation of masculine and feminine character."[62] That is, while both male and female children identify with, and then distinguish themselves from, the mother, there is a passivity to female differentiation which is not the case with the male child:

> The little girl learns that although she must grow up (become a separate person), she will grow up to be a woman, like her mother, and have babies of her own; she will, in a broad sense, merely take her mother's place....And so the emphasis for the girl is upon the fact that she *is* a female and that all she needs to do to realize her full femininity is to wait.[63]

This passivity continues to be emphasized throughout a woman's life: in menstruation, the act of intercourse, pregnancy, childbirth and lactation, and eventually menopause.[64] All of these events are "definite, natural and irreversible bodily occurrences";[65] they are "things which *happen* to a woman more than things that she *does*."[66]

Plaskow gives "women's experience" a concrete definition: "The experiences of women in the course of a history never free from cultural role definitions."[67] She describes

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[61] Saiving, p. 103.

[62] *Ibid.*

[63] *Ibid.*

[64] Saiving, p. 104.

[65] *Ibid.*

[66] *Ibid.*

[67] Plaskow, p. 11.

it through reference to a fictive heroine of Doris Lessing: Martha Quest.[68] Martha demonstrates how the physical passivity Saiving describes becomes manifest in life decisions, or the lack of them:

> Martha's experience is never unrelated to external definitions of who and what she should be, but her relationship to what is expected of her goes through several different stages....she behaves according to form, she exemplifies the passivity which, according to our psychologists, is the chief feminine characteristic. She drifts into situations, molds her personality to others' images and expectations.[69]

The passivity of women's identity is contrasted by Saiving with the more active identity of men. The male child, rather than simply waiting to become what he will be, must instead define his masculinity without the concrete physical references or proofs which are intrinsic to femininity.[70] Fundamentally ambiguous, masculinity is never so definitively *achieved* as is femininity. It requires, on the part of the man, consistent and ongoing effort:

> The man's sense of his own masculinity, then, is throughout characterized by uncertainty, challenge, and the feeling that he must again and again prove himself a man. It also calls for a kind of objective achievement and a greater degree of self-differentiation and self-development than are required of the woman *as* woman. In a sense, masculinity is an endless process of *becoming*, while in femininity the emphasis is on *being*.[71]

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[68] See Plaskow, pp. 34-48. See also Doris Lessing, *The Children of Violence*, Books 1-5: *Martha Quest, A Proper Marriage, A Ripple from the Storm, Landlocked, The Four-Gated City* (Frogmore, St. Albans: Granada [Panther Books], 1966).

[69] Plaskow, p. 49.

[70] Saiving, pp. 103-104.

[71] Saiving, p. 105.

The essential ambivalence of masculine identity results in men being generally more susceptible to both anxiety and the self-aggrandizement which follows it. First, what culminates in pride--the model of human nature as dual, in conflict and therefore anxious--is more descriptive of male, rather than human, reality:

> But do we necessarily sense ourselves as dual and is this a cause of disquiet? Do women find this to be the case? Or are we perhaps concerned here with a peculiarly male dilemma?...Why (from a woman's perspective) are men so curiously unintegrated, so disconnected from mundane reality, so abstracted from the processes of nature? Is it simply centuries of conditioning, of being spared the washing-up and the screaming child?[72]

Second, pride itself--the denial of finitude, the will to power, the attempt to inflate the self's importance through domination of nature and others, all of which culminates in the final abortive attempt to put oneself in the place of God--is essentially a *masculine*, rather than a universal, dilemma:

> The man with his inflated ego is not content to be himself, but wills to be another greater than himself. He attempts to avoid coming to himself; he fails to move inward. For woman, by contrast, the failure is a failure to come to herself, and so she wishes to be rid of herself by losing herself in another.[73]

2.2) Women's sin

It is important to note that while all of the four critics treated here develop a definition of women's sin, the definition is qualified in various ways. Saiving discusses the

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[72] Hampson, p. 51.

[73] Hampson, p. 49.

ambiguity of distinguishing between biological and cultural factors,[74] which is amplified by Plaskow.[75] From this point proceeds further qualifications: (i) that this form of sin is not restricted to women, but can be experienced by men[76] and (ii) that women are not, by nature, immune to the sin of pride although they have on the whole much less experience of it than men.[77] A final qualification is made explicitly only by Plaskow:

> Fifth, and most important, I am also not arguing for the universality of my own definition of women's experience... My view of "women's experience" is one view of modern, white, western, middle-class "women's experience."[78]

The preceding analysis of women's experience show's that pride is not the universal primary sin, because it is not typical of women. It also shows, by way of contrast with masculine experience, that pride is essentially a male temptation. Proceeding from these two conclusions is a third: that there is another form of sin to which women, in general, are more susceptible. This kind of sin is exemplified by denial, rather than exaggeration, of freedom. It is also a primary response to anxiety[79] and as such is equal--but opposite--to the sin of pride.[80] Saiving gives *women's sin* an initial characterization:

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[74] See Saiving, p. 101; pp. 103-106.

[75] See Plaskow, chapter I, section A (pp. 12-28). Hampson also refers to this problem in her discussion of Jean Miller on pps. 49-50.

[76] Plaskow, pp. 5-6; Saiving, p. 101.

[77] Saiving, p. 107; Plaskow, p. 6.

[78] Plaskow, p. 6.

[79] Plaskow, p. 62.

[80] Saiving, p. 109.

> For the temptations of woman *as woman* are not the same as the temptations of man *as man*, and the specifically feminine forms of sin...have a quality which can never be encompassed by such terms as "pride" and "will-to-power." They are better suggested by such items as triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing center or focus; dependence on others for one's own self-definition; tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence; inability to respect the boundaries of privacy; sentimentality, gossipy sociability, and mistrust of reason--in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self.[81]

Judith Plaskow uses this passage in Saiving as the basis for a more concrete definition of women's sin as "the failure to take responsibility for self-actualization."[82] That is, a woman's sense of self is either too easily lost, or never authentically established to begin with. Frequently, a woman's self-definition can consist entirely of what she represents to others: wife, mother, daughter. By failing to distinguish and assert herself apart from these roles and the proliferating details of daily existence, she is guilty of denying her freedom. In other words, she sins:

> She is the woman who discovers that one baby and one husband will not fill all the empty hours of a day no matter how hard she may try to make her housework more difficult. She is the woman who waits seven years for her husband to decide who *he* is going to be so that she can know who she is... She is the woman who is consumed by a guilt she can never assuage through total self-sacrifice because deep down it is a guilt goaded on by an even deeper sense of guilt, the guilt of not being a self, the guilt of denying her full humanity and hiding in a deformed existence. Until women repent of

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[81] *Ibid.*

[82] Plaskow, p. 3.

their sin, the sin of having no self to sacrifice, they will know no end to the cycle of guilt and violence turned inward.[83]

This "feminine" denial of freedom, which corresponds to the "masculine" denial of nature, is in some ways analogous to what Niebuhr refers to as "sensuality."

2.3) Sensuality

Niebuhr is read as having two definitions of sensuality: one broad--denial of freedom--and one narrow--preoccupation with impulse and desire.[84] It is the broader definition that Plaskow, for example, takes as descriptive of women's sin:

> The argument is not that women are more likely than men to "lose themselves in some aspect of the world's vitalities," but that, given society's expectations concerning them, they are more liable to "become lost in the detailed processes, activities, and interests of existence."[85]

Niebuhr's definition of sensuality is flawed for two reasons. First, he erroneously subordinates it to pride, when it should, in fact, be treated as an equal but opposite way of responding to anxiety.[86] Second, as a result of this subordination, he fails to develop it as a category of sin. That is, the initial broad definition of sensuality as denial of freedom is later considerably narrowed, because all examples of how it is manifest refer to inordinate impulse and desire:

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[83] Nelson Dunfee, p. 324.

[84] See Plaskow, pp. 60-61.

[85] Niebuhr, NDI, p. 179 and p. 185, respectively, as quoted by Plaskow, p. 63.

[86] Nelson Dunfee, p. 319; Plaskow, pp. 62-63.

> Hence, although Niebuhr describes the sin of hiding as an escape "from [one's] unlimited possibilities of freedom, from the perils and responsibilities of self-determination, by immersing [one's self] into a 'mutable good,' by losing [one's self] in some natural vitality," he later refers to the sins of sensuality "as expressed for instance in sexual license, gluttony, extravagance, drunkenness and abandonment to various forms of physical desire.[87]

Niebuhr, it is argued, fails to take into account the seriousness of self-loss: by describing the sins of sensuality as simply deliberate submission to impulse, he trivializes what is a significant and primary sin. Had he, instead of maintaining the primacy of pride, made sensuality and pride equal and opposite sinful responses to anxiety--abuse of freedom *either* by exaggerating *or* denying it--then his doctrine of sin could have been more plausibly universal.

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[87] Niebuhr, NDI, p. 186 and p. 228, respectively, as quoted by Nelson Dunfee, p. 318.

CHAPTER III
CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY IN GENERAL

The understanding of contextuality I am using as a basis for discussing the contextuality of Niebuhr's theology is that of the Canadian theologian, Douglas John Hall.[88] Hall speaks from a North American perspective,[89] which is particularly relevant as Niebuhr is clearly and deliberately a North American theologian. But Hall's analysis is also illuminating because it explicitly addresses methodology. It reflects at a meta-level on what contextual method *is* and *means*:

> To claim that Christian theology is by definition contextual is to insist that the *engagement* of the milieu in which theology is done is as such a dimension of the doing of theology. The attempt to comprehend one's culture--to grasp at some depth its aspirations, its priorities, its anxieties; to discern the dominant ideational motifs of its history; to distinguish its real from its rhetorical mores--all this belongs to the theological task as such.[90]

> True contextuality means the initiating and nurturing of a *dialogue* with one's culture, a genuine give-and-take, in which the world is permitted to speak for itself, and in which therefore the Christian community opens itself to the *risk* of hearing things that it had not anticipated and to which it cannot *readily* respond. In other words, in a fully contextual approach to its subject, the disciple community sees its socio-historical habitat, not only as a field to be

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[88] as elaborated in *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), particularly the initial definition on pps. 75-92. Hereafter: TTF. As I am using Hall's definition as a point of departure, rather than rehearsing or paraphrasing it, I am wholly responsible for what follows.

[89] See TTF, chapter 2, section 7.4.

[90] *Ibid.*, p. 78.

investigated but as a partner in the investigation--and therefore as contributor to the theological task itself.[91]

Contextuality is neither the rigid application of theoretical universals to particular situations nor a complete identification with or submersion in particular situations. Both of these inadequate approaches are predicated on analogy or the absence of relationship; in both cases, "like seeks after like."[92]

The first approach demands analogy within the Christian community; it attempts to homogenize diversity in the mistaken assumption that conformity means unity. It confuses lack of interpretation with eternality of truth. Variation is expected to disappear after conversion as 'true' Christians automatically think and feel the same. If dissension exists, the critical minority is either exhorted to conform again to the prevailing principle or excluded as 'unchristian.' As Niebuhr once observed,

> No moral project can be presented and no adventure made without resistance from the traditionalists and debate among experimentalists. But besides being more effective, such a course would be more interesting than this constant bathing in sentimentalities. If the church could only achieve schisms on ethical issues! They would represent life and reality. Its present schisms are not immoral as such. They are immoral only in the sense that they perpetuate issues which have no relevancy in our day.[93]

This approach is also characterized by suspicion of the secular world: dialogue with context is eschewed because the context is considered to be evil. The 'truth' guarded within the

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[91] *Ibid.*, p. 79.

[92] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press, 1973), p. 26.

[93] RN, *Leaves From the Notebook of A Tamed Cynic* (Cleveland and New York: Meridien, 1969 [eighth ed.]), p. 96.

church requires, for its survival, a belief in the *lack* of truth outside it. A refusal to acknowledge the contextuality of empirical reality is mistaken for transcendence of it:

> There is no such thing as non-contextual human thought, including theological thought... What there is, however (and therefore it is necessary to engage in such a discussion as this), is a form of thought *which does not regard itself as contextual*, and which for complex reasons is treated by whole segments of the populace of this continent as if it were contextually neutral.[94]

The second approach is predicated on analogy between the church and its context: it assumes that relationship is convertible with or reducible to identification. In this case *context* is trivialized to mean simply a specific culture, society or situation. Both the history of the context and the larger context of its surroundings are disregarded rather than reflected on as constitutive and influential elements in the formation of its present state.[95] Here the church comes to represent little more than a "religious variation on existing opinions and mores."[96] 'Truth' is simply whatever is in fashion; the historical continuum of the Christian tradition is treated like a shopping mall where ideas and experiences are picked out because of how nicely they *go* with the contemporary outfit.

Contextual method seeks an alternative to these two inadequate approaches while resisting the desire to absolutize that alternative. It is firm but open-ended, flexible but structurally sound. For these reasons it eludes fixed and precise definition:[97] it is in relationship with context and therefore the changing context is partially determinative of it,

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[94] Hall, TTF, p. 76.

[95] See the discussion of situationalism in Hall, TTF, pp. 150-52.

[96] TTF, p. 112.

[97] See the Conclusion in Hall, TTF, pp. 323-4.

is "partner in the investigation."[98] Yet it is at the same time not simply the absence of method and so is clearly describable. Put simply, contextual theology is critical world-commitment. I am arguing that there are three dimensions which are fundamental and necessary to an authentic contextuality: discernment, engagement and commitment.

3.1) Discernment

The dimension of discernment in contextual method involves two primary and interrelated endeavours: identifying what it is *not* (i.e., marking its boundaries) and identifying what it *is* (i.e., perceiving its determining characteristics). How is one's context defined? Geographically? Temporally? Through sex, culture or ethnicity? Further:

> Can contexts be so readily identified? Where does one context leave off and another begin? And within a given here and now are there not in fact many different contexts?[99]

Discerning the signs of the times[100] is thus both a negative and a positive task. In order to illumine the context's critical themes it is almost invariably necessary to clear away the illusions which obscure them. Extreme forms of nationalism, for example, are often the veils which conceal more urgent and systemic social problems. The tireless quest for distraction which characterizes contemporary North American life conceals a fear that reflection--stillness--leads to despair: we watch television, and on television we watch 'sitcoms' instead of the news, which *depresses* us.

Discernment is neither a purely theoretical nor a static endeavour. It requires, rather, a consistent awareness of and sensitivity to the flow of information which continuously issues from one's time and place and what surrounds one's time and place. Put in another

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[98] *Ibid.*, p. 79.

[99] *Ibid.*, p. 145.

[100] The title of one of Niebuhr's works. *Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermons for Today and Tomorrow* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946).

way, the general and the particular in this connection are dialectically related: one's particular context informs what context means in general as much as context in general informs one's understanding of context in particular.[101]

For example, it was the specific contextual realities of Kahnesetake and the Mohawk crisis of 1990, or the Cree protest, which began in 1989, against Hydro-Québec's Great Whale Project, which brought to many people throughout the Western world awareness of the larger contextual plight of Aboriginal North Americans.[102] Conversely, the specific contextual reality of Québec is clarified by the larger context with which it is so uneasily linked: Canada. This dialectic of discernment is irreducible; it exemplifies the symbiotic relationship between the context and its surroundings, between the negative and positive aspects of definition. It precedes, and then also accompanies, engagement.

3.2) Engagement

Engagement essentially means entering into a critical, authentic and dynamic relationship with one's time and place. This response to what is discerned, like discernment itself, has both negative and positive characteristics.

As I have stated at the beginning of this section, engaging the context is not simply identifying with it. That, as Hall points out, would mean monologue rather than dialogue.[103] As discernment does not involve face value acceptance of the context's most prominent trends, engagement does not mean acquiescence to or amplification of its most visible values. Rather, response has a fundamentally *critical* nature: it seeks not to placate but to challenge, to provoke. It searches--in Scripture, in the Christian tradition, in the spatial and temporal continuum within and surrounding the context, in the contemporary

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[101] See also the discussion in Hall, TTF, chapter 2, section 7.2.

[102] Details on the Mohawk Crisis and the continuing situation can be obtained through the Band Council of Kahnesatake. Details on the Great Whale protest and the continuing situation can be obtained through the Cree Tribal Council or the Great Whale Environmental Review Office in Montréal.

[103] TTF, pp. 113-114.

signs and minority voices of the context itself--for what is relevant rather than what is acceptable.

For example, that the Christian message lives--and can thrive--as one among others is something crucial to know now in our contemporary pluralistic North American society. At the same time, however, the particular Christian message of hope is especially relevant to this society which is increasingly characterized by cynicism and despair. That some of the most dynamic Biblical characters were *not men* is something which needs to be stressed in response to our still grossly patriarchal Western churches. Or, as Hall writes, in relation to the context of Germany in the 1930's:

> At that time, the dean of the Berlin cathedral, Heinrich Grüber, founder of the so-called Grüber-büro (an organization which helped Jews and other threatened persons escape from the Nazis), said very simply: "The *gospel* in our time is that Jesus Christ was a Jew."[104]

The authenticity necessary to engagement extends both to the context and to theological method. More specifically, that it is authentic means that engagement is in earnest and that it involves ongoing *self*-critique. Context is not merely a source of information to theology or a subject to be observed, digested and pronounced upon. Rather, as I have already noted, the context and theology are in relationship: there must be a consistent and vital exchange between the two participants. The context's contribution is free; it cannot be predetermined or regulated. A significant part of it, in fact, may be critique of the inadequacies or failures of theology. In other words, a fundamental part of theology's response is still *listening*. As Hall stresses,

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[104] *Ibid.*, p. 84.

> We have already used the word "dialogue" to describe the relation between the theological community and its social context, and we must be clear that this means *dialogue*![105]

Perhaps the most significant danger of theology's engagement is that its emphasis on critical scrutiny of the context results in a failure to engage in critical scrutiny of itself. There is a perpetual tendency in theology to inflate *faith* in a transcendent perspective to mean *speaking from* a transcendent perspective, which is ideology or dogmatism.[106] Authenticity regulates the content of theology's response by making ongoing self-critique central to engagement. This self-critique--which is the same thing as humility--ought to preface, and combine with the critique which issues from the context or dialogue partner. Both serve to ensure that theology's response comes from a place which is honest.

Engagement is also not merely a theoretical endeavour; it does not remain in the academic realm or end with thought, reflection and discussion. In other words, contextual engagement, by its very nature, involves praxis. That it is dynamic means that the thought, reflection and discussion fundamental to engagement are irreducibly joined with *participation*. This is a reciprocal relationship: while thought cannot preclude act, neither can act dispense with thought. Rather, they inform and correct each other. The relevance of theory, after all, is determined in great part by how it functions as a transformative source in actual critical situations. On the other hand, without reflection action becomes simply *re*action: it is blind.[107]

3.3) Commitment

I have described in the previous two sections what contextual method is, its principle characteristics, even why it is necessary. But all this does not go very far as exhortation;

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[105] *Ibid.*, p. 79.

[106] See the definitions of ideology in Hall, TTF, p. 77, n. 16.

[107] See also see Hall's discussion of praxis in TTF, pp. 20-22.

description, regardless how apt, does not provide the impetus required for theology to *be* contextual. There is thus a third dimension to contextual method which serves to sustain and uphold the other two. Commitment initially means that discernment and engagement are ceaseless, perpetual, constant. Implied in that initial definition, however, which is insufficient in itself, is what generates, nourishes and supports such activity: faith.

A profound dimension of Christian faith is that life--with all its difficulty, tragedy, suffering and apparent *lack* of meaning--is meaningful. This is why Christians have both the ability and responsibility to penetrate and emerge from the most threatening darkness of their context without ultimately losing their way or falling into despair. The dimensions of discernment and engagement in contextual theology make such journeys necessary. The hope which we can bring out of these journeys is authentic precisely because it proceeds from experience, rather than denial, of all that they entail and demand. It is precisely Christian faith in a transcendent (and partially revealed) meaning, that is, which enables theology to be honest about and committed to its context. This faith does not allow us to supersede particular reality and direct our gaze upwards in passive supplication. It is what permits and requires us to go further into the world, to thoroughly embrace it:

> Christian belief may indeed lift one, in some real sense, out of immediate preoccupation with the world. Without this, Christians would lack the *perspective* that is necessary for understanding their "here and now," as well as the prospect of *willing* their participation in it. But it is for the sake of participation that we are lifted out; it is in order to achieve a new status of being "in" the world that we are denied the right to be, simply, "of" it.[108]

[108] *Ibid.*, p. 81.

CHAPTER IV

NIEBUHR'S CONTEXTUAL METHOD: CHRISTIAN REALISM

Niebuhr, to my knowledge, never made an explicit claim that his theology was contextual. But this is hardly to be expected, as contextual theology, though arguably always practiced by a minority throughout the Christian tradition, was only named as such in the past three decades. He even denied at times that he was a *theologian*,[109] this can be taken either as evidence of modesty or as a deliberate attempt to distinguish himself from some systematic theologies which he found methodical to the point of irrelevance. Yet it is my argument here that to read Niebuhr's theology as contextual is the most coherent and consistent interpretation.

To demonstrate that Niebuhr was a product of his context, however, or even that he responded to his context, is clearly not sufficient to show that his theology is contextual. *All* theology is essentially contextual, regardless of whether admitted. Hendrikus Berkhof makes this point in reference to Christian anthropologies: "By studying how systematic theologies have poured meaning into Genesis 1:26, one could write a piece of Europe's cultural history."[110] Hall is more explicit:

> The fact is, of course, that in a certain sense all theological thought reflects its context, intentionally or not. We are, after all, creatures of time and space.[111]

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[109] in his "Intellectual Autobiography." From *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought*, ed. Charles W. Kegley (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1984), p. 3. See also Richard W. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, p. x.

[110] *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, rev, ed., trans. Sierd Woudstra (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), p. 184. Also quoted in Hall, TTF, p. 76.

[111] TTF, p. 76.

An argument that Niebuhr's theology is contextual must therefore show that he was *deliberately* and *consistently* contextual, which will mean providing evidence of contextual methodology. This methodology will be reflected at the level of theological content; the specific example of this correspondence will be his doctrine of sin as discussed in chapter 5.

4.1) Christian realism as method

Niebuhr's awareness of the importance of discerning and engaging his context was already developing into method in Detroit, where he was minister of Bethel Evangelical Church from 1915 to 1928. He later observed of this period:

> In my parish duties I found that the simple idealism into which the classical faith had evaporated was as irrelevant to the crises of personal life as it was to the complex social issues of an industrial city.[112]

In 1922, Niebuhr established what became known as the Bethel "Forum," a regular Sunday evening service where "he preached--actually lectured--on the pressing issues of the day."[113] He established the Detroit branch of the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order, an organization which "would study industrial capitalism and develop a Christian approach to reforming it."[114] From 1925-1926 he was chairman of John Smith's Interracial Committee, which studied race relations in Detroit;[115] in September of 1926 he invited AFL leaders to speak at Bethel before an AFL convention, which caused much

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[112] RN, "Intellectual Autobiography," *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought*, p. 6.

[113] Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, p. 66.

[114] *Ibid.*, p. 75.

[115] *Ibid.*, p. 92-93.

controversy.[116] At this time he writes in his diary, which is later published as *Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*:

> I can't say that I have done anything in my life to dramatize the conflict between the gospel and the world. But I find it increasingly interesting to set the two in juxtaposition at least in my mind and in the minds of others.[117]

This fundamental correlation is later asserted as an explicit and ongoing methodological dimension of his theology:

> On the other hand [these essays] give an historical (not, I hope, too autobiographical) account of the tortuous path of the author's mind in adjusting the original Protestant heritage of individualism and perfectionism through a world depression and two world wars to the present realities of a highly technical and collective culture, facing the perils of a nuclear age.[118]

> The intellectual pilgrimage which these succeeding volumes reveal shows that I began to criticize liberal viewpoints from a Marxist perspective in the first instance, and that I learned gradually to subject both viewpoints to a Christian criticism. I learned increasingly to value highly, rather than be apologetic for, the unique emphases of Biblical faith.[119]

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[116] *Ibid.*, p. 96.

[117] Taken from the eighth edition. (Cleveland and New York: Meridien, 1969), p. 45.

[118] RN, *Man's Nature and His Communities* (New York: Scribner's, 1965), p. 16.

[119] RN, "Intellectual Autobiography," *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought*, pp. 9-10.

Such passages as the above have almost invariably been interpreted as evidence of *change* in Niebuhr's theological content,[120] which is sometimes so 'radical' that he is charged with inconsistency or incoherence.[121] Yet it is my argument that behind these changes is a methodology, which they reveal. That is, while it is patent that the above passages show changes in content, they also demonstrate *the consistent and deliberate nature of a method which demands changes in content in response to contextual realities.* Interpreting Niebuhr's admission of these changes *solely* as development, therefore, or even as evidence of inconsistency, betrays a fundamental failure to distinguish method from content. It is a category mistake. Moreover, when viewed in the light of his contextual method, many of the changing (and enduring) elements in his theological content become not only comprehensible but necessary. This contextual method which is latent but identifiable as far back as *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*[122] eventually becomes articulated as the open-ended approach of Christian realism.

4.2) Christian realism: an initial description

There exist almost as many definitions of Christian realism as interpretations of Niebuhr. It has been called a political philosophy,[123] a social ethic,[124] an example of

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[120] See for example Ronald Stone in the preface to *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians*, especially p. 7 and pp. 11-12, and Richard Fox in *Reinhold Niebuhr*, especially chapter 6 where he discusses the motives behind *Moral Man and Immoral Society.*

[121] See Ruth Smith, "Reinhold Niebuhr and History: The Elusive Liberal Critique," *Horizons* 15 (1988), pp. 98-113, or Kenneth Thompson, "The Political Philosophy of Reinhold Niebuhr," esp. p. 245, in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought.*

[122] See for example the discussion of politics in church, p. 47; the critique of evangelism, p. 71; or Niebuhr's qualifications of the Christian love ethic, p. 223.

[123] by Kenneth W. Thompson, for example, in "Niebuhr as Thinker and Doer," *The Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), esp. page 105.

religious neoconservatism,[125] and even an ideological justification of the American Empire.[126] Some of these are true in part and some are clearly erroneous. Here are some ways in which Niebuhr, who tends to use 'biblical' and 'Christian' as convertible terms in this connection, describes it:

> It is difficult to know whether the criticism of both liberal and Marxist views of human nature was prompted by a profounder understanding of the Biblical Faith; or whether this understanding was prompted by the refutation of the liberal and Marxist faith by the tragic facts of ccntemporary history which included two world wars and the encounter of a liberal culture with two idolatrous tyrannies, first Nazism and then Communism, resting respectively upon the foundations of moral cynicism and moral utopianism. About *the circular relation between the presuppositions of faith and the facts of experience* I must say more presently.[127]

> [It is] my strong conviction that a realist conception of human nature should be made the servant of an ethic of progressive justice and should not be made into a bastion of conservatism, particularly a conservatism which defends unjust privileges. I might define this conviction as the guiding principle

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[124] See James Childress, "Niebuhr's Realistic-Pragmatic Approach to War and 'the Nuclear Dilemma'" in *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time*, ed. Richard Harries (London & Oxford: Mowbray, 1986).

[125] by Russell Kirk, among others. See Ronald Preston, "Reinhold Niebuhr and the New Right" in *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time.*

[126] See John Swomley, *American Empire: The Political Ethics of Twentieth Century Conquest* (London: Macmillan, 1970).

[127] RN, "Intellectual Autobiography," *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought*, p. 9. Italics mine.

throughout my mature life of the relation of religious responsibility to political affairs.[128]

Christianity's view of history is tragic insofar as it recognizes evil as an inevitable concomitant of even the highest spiritual enterprises. It is beyond tragedy inasfar as it does not regard evil as inherent in existence itself but as finally under the dominion of a good God.[129]

4.3) Methodological Specifics

My reading of Niebuhr's Christian realism as methodology will demonstrate how it exemplifies the three dimensions I have described as essential to a contextual approach in chapter one.

4.3.1) Discernment: the *realism* in Christian realism

The modern world is so full of bunkum that it is difficult to attempt honesty in it without an undue emphasis upon the critical faculty.[130]

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[128] RN, *Man's Nature and His Communities: Essays on the Dynamics and Enigmas of Man's Personal and Social Existence* (New York: Scribner's, 1965), pp. 24-25. As quoted in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, edited and introduced by Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), p. xxii. I have removed Brown's italics.

[129] RN, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Scribner's, 1937), pp. x-xi.

[130] RN, from *Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, p. 158, as quoted in D.J. Hall, "The Cross and Contemporary Culture," *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time*, p. 186.

Discernment, I have argued, "calls the thing what it really is."[131] It both identifies the illusions which obscure real aspects of the context and attempts to reveal these aspects in themselves. In other words, discernment is fundamentally *realistic*. A representative example of Niebuhr's discernment can be found in his consistent and intensive scrutiny of the prevailing thematic strain of his context: liberalism.

Niebuhr inherited a liberal perspective and throughout his life drew on, struggled with and argued against many of liberalism's tenets.[132] One of the most pervasive and problematic of liberal illusions was an unyielding optimistic belief in moral and historical progress. Such optimism was perverse--and desperate--precisely because it so explicitly contradicted historical and contemporary realities. A kind of symbiotic relationship between secular liberalism and liberal Protestantism existed in Niebuhr's America. More specifically, secular liberal optimism about historical progress was mirrored by liberal Christian optimism about moral progress, and vice versa.[133] Niebuhr sought to discern and expose the incongruity between American optimism and contextual realities. Two dimensions of this incongruity were particularly dangerous: a refusal to acknowledge the human capacity for evil and a refusal to take the facts of human history seriously.

One of Niebuhr's most penetrating criticisms of liberal Protestantism was that its dogged commitment to moral perfectionism and its hope for, and faith in, a utopian future were based on a complete denial of contemporary experience. Such utopian 'idealism' obscured realities. The following passage is as much an attack on this theology's *blindness* to its context as a critique of its sentimental content:

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[131] Hall, "The Cross and Contemporary Culture," *Reinhold Niebuhr and The Issues of Our Time*, p. 187.

[132] For a discussion of the ambiguity of Niebuhr's relationship to liberalism, particularly in reference to his understanding of history, see Ruth Smith, "Reinhold Niebuhr and History: The Elusive Liberal Critique," *op. cit.*

[133] For extended reflection on the peculiar compatibility of some forms of Protestantism and American self-understanding, see RN's *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner's, 1952).

> In spite of the disillusionment of the World War, the average liberal Protestant Christian is still convinced that the kingdom of God is gradually approaching, that the League of Nations is its partial fulfilment and the Kellogg Pact its covenant, that the wealthy will be persuaded by the church to dedicate their power and privilege to the common good and that they are doing so in increasing numbers, that the conversion of individuals is the only safe method of solving the social problem, and that such ethical weaknesses as religion still betrays are due to its theological obscurantism which will be sloughed off by the progress of enlightenment.[134]

He was aware that unreflective belief in moral and historical progress masked disregard for the depth of the human capacity for evil. At the root of liberal assumptions that reason, science, education, and persuasion could culminate in an ideal society was a failure to recognize the ambiguity and complexity of human nature, as human history had attested:

> It is the absurd notion of modern liberalism, both Christian and secular, that the Christian estimate of man's sinfulness is determined by the Biblical account of the fall of Adam, and that it can be dismissed by anyone who does not find this primitive account credible. Actually, the estimate is supported by overwhelming evidence taken from both a sober observation of human behaviour and from introspective analysis.[135]

Superficial optimism also betrayed a denial of the events and lessons of human history. In America, this often took the form of overt condescension: many of us on this continent treat the tragedies of European history as simply that--European--as though such

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[134] RN, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Scribner's, 1932), pp. 79-80.

[135] RN, "Intellectual Autobiography," *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought*, p. 11.

events could never occur in our enlightened and unblemished context.[136] The most striking quality of American optimism was for Niebuhr also its weakest point: in order to maintain itself, it had to deny the significance of brutal facts of experience. The gravity of such denial, of course, is that in refusing to acknowledge reality, we are automatically prevented from *learning* from it. Liberal optimism was dangerous precisely because it was anti-contextual. It had to ignore its context in order to survive:

> The achievements of a liberal culture are naturally not as impressive, and its self-assurance not as complacent, at the end of two world wars and confronting the dread prospect of an atomic conflict as they were in the heyday of its triumphs. But there are always some proponents of a credo and defenders of a culture whose defense becomes the more desperate as evidence multiplies that its foundations are inadequate and its conclusions in conflict with the experiences of life.[137]

4.3.2) Engagement: the *relationship* between Christian and realism[138]

i) The critical aspect

Any theology which is committed to relationship with the world, as I have stated, runs the risk of simply identifying with it or capitulating to relativism.[139] The dimension of Christian realism which prevents this capitulation is *prophetic*; it involves critique of and

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[136] This point is discussed at some length by Hall in *Thinking the Faith*, p. 161.

[137] RN, "Intellectual Autobiography," *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought*, p. 13.

[138] The discussion will follow the three dimensions of engagement described in chapter 3, section 2: the critical, the authentic and the dynamic.

[139] Niebuhr's Christian Realism has been criticized as relativistic *and* as absolutistic. See the "Intellectual Autobiography," *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought*, pp. 13-23.

commentary on contextual realities which utilises a perspective that is in some way transcendent of them.

This prophetic dimension owes a great deal to Niebuhr's appreciation of the prophetic tradition in Judaism and the Old(er) Testament.[140] His engagement with the culture was challenging rather than apologetic. He consistently provoked, which invariably meant provocation or initiation of further dialogue:

> These reflections are therefore presented without much hope that they will elicit any general concurrence. Perhaps they will help a little to *shake the easy faith* by which modern liberalism lives and through which the actual and tragic facts of contemporary history are, in the opinion of the present writer, obscured.[141]

Yet prophetic critique must draw on a perspective which is in some way distinct from the context it is facing. Niebuhr frequently found these viewpoints in the context itself: in its majority and minority voices; its dominant and concealed themes; in what, spatially and temporally, surrounded it.[142] His most consistent perspective, however, was Christian. It has two components: the traditional and the biblical.

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[140] Niebuhr's references to Hebraic tradition and his debt to it are numerous. A succinct discussion can be found in "The Jewish Capacity for Civic Virtue," from chapter 13 of *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 185-188.

[141] RN, *Reflections on the End of an Era* (New York: Scribner's, 1934), pp. ix-x. Italics mine.

[142] See in particular *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Scribner's, 1932), which utilizes a socialist perspective to address the issue of power and individual/group relations; *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defense* (New York: Scribner's, 1944); or *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Scribner's, 1953). The use of diverse contextual perspectives to address contextual themes is also evident in Niebuhr's numerous articles and essays. For a fairly comprehensive bibliography of these, see *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought*, pp. 533-568.

Niebuhr sought those voices in the Christian tradition which were relevant to his context. He drew "especially on the Hebrew prophets, Jesus, Paul, the Reformers and Kierkegaard"[143] in his attempt to find an illuminating and challenging counterpoint to the status quo. The thought of Augustine was particularly influential in this connection. Augustine's realism served as a place from which to address the inadequacies and contradictions of liberal idealism:

> I am, however, surprised to note in retrospect how late I was in studying the thought of Augustine carefully. The matter is surprising because the thought of this theologian was to answer so many of my unanswered questions and to emancipate me finally from the notion that the Christian faith was in some way identical with the moral idealism of the past century.[144]

His critique also utilized a biblical perspective. This involved drawing on biblical texts and passages to clarify and inform specific arguments or human experiences.[145] Even Judith Plaskow admits that he

> ... has often been accused of picking his "biblical" and revealed doctrines *on the basis of a prior analysis of the human situation.*[146]

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[143] Robert McAfee Brown, "Introduction," *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. xiii.

[144] RN, "Intellectual Autobiography," *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought*, p. 9. See also "Augustine's Political Realism" in RN, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Scribner's, 1953).

[145] See for example the use of Galatians 2:20 in Niebuhr's discussion of grace, NDI, pp. 107-126; or "David and the Temple" in *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Scribner's, 1937).

[146] Plaskow, *op. cit*, p. 62. Italics mine.

Niebuhr also drew on the Bible's dramatic-historical presentation of reality. Biblical meaning, rather than arising from either the Bible's status as myth or historical account, emerges from the fact that mythological and historical perspectives are united in it in an unique and powerful way. This integrated presentation of reality, he argued, frequently serves as the most comprehensive way of understanding the paradox of human existence:

> Though I have meditated on these issues for some time, I have only recently come to realize fully why the dramatic-historical account of the Bible (about which an earlier generation of modern theologians have been unduly apologetic) should give a truer view of both the nobility and the misery of man than all the wisdom of scientists and philosophers. The fact is that the human self can only be understood in a dramatic-historical environment.[147]

ii) Authenticity

Prophetic critique, however, in preventing capitulation to relativism, ends up courting another failure: absolutism. As already stated, emphasis on scrutiny of the context often results in theology's failure to scrutinize *itself*. One of Niebuhr's most repeated warnings was against 'the pretension of finality.'[148] He argued that any philosophy, political system, religion or belief which claims either that (a) ultimate fulfilment is possible in history or (b) that it has privileged access to transcendent truths, trivializes human freedom. Moreover, it exhibits the failure of attempting to put itself in the place of God.[149] Christian realism resisted both tendencies through consistent self-critique and an emphasis on the unique significance of history. Niebuhr constantly subjected his theological

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[147] RN, "Intellectual Autobiography," *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought*, p. 11.

[148] Hall, "The Cross and Contemporary Culture," *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time*, p. 184. Niebuhr also describes this as 'the menace of finality'. See Ursula Niebuhr ed., *Remembering Reinhold Niebuhr: Letters of Reinhold and Ursula M. Niebuhr* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), p. 398.

[149] See the discussion of intellectual pride in NDI, pp. 194-198.

position to rigorous evaluation. This issued both from a commitment to address theology to its time and place and, as many commentators have stressed, a profound sense of humility.[150] He was aware of the hypocrisy and danger of an unexamined prophetic position:

> In short, a genuine Christian apologetic must be prepared to bring the judgment of Christ to bear as rigorously on the household of faith as upon the secular and the pagan world, even as the prophets of Israel were as severe in mediating the divine judgment upon Israel as upon Babylon.[151]

This judgement is perpetual. The faith in transcendent meaning which allows theology to be critical of its context is not its source of divine 'authority' but rather its reason for increased responsibility. Niebuhr was aware that theology which is irrelevant to its time and place is meaning*less*, not maintained by 'otherworldly' affiliations. What kept Christian realism relevant--even more than its commitment to discern and critique--was ceaseless self-evaluation:

> We can escape relativity and uncertainty only by piling experience upon experience, checking hypothesis against hypothesis, correcting errors by considering new perspectives, not by the mere assertion of an absolute idea that is beyond experience.[152]

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[150] This is a point on which Charles C. Brown is particularly critical of Richard Fox's biography for its erroneous portrayal of Niebuhr as proud and arrogant. Brown quotes Arthur Schlesinger, who wrote: "to a greater degree than anyone I have ever known, Niebuhr was a man whose humility was not theoretical but authentic." *Niebuhr and His Age* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1992), p. 262.

[151] RN, "Intellectual Autobiography," *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought*, p. 22.

[152] RN, as quoted in Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, p. 117.

He also consistently stressed the significance of historical experience. History is the arena in which life's meaning is disclosed through experience, revelation and the complex relationships between them. But meaning is never ultimately and finally displayed in history: in that case, the empirical and the transcendent would no longer be related but identified. Thus the paradox of human nature as both finite and free is reciprocally related to the paradox of history as meaningful in contingency.[153] This interpretation of history had a principal place in Niebuhr's ongoing debates with Paul Tillich and Karl Barth. For Niebuhr, Tillich's 'ontological bias' ultimately robbed history of meaning:

> But if philosophers try to comprehend the patterns of historical destiny within a framework of ontology, they make nonsense of history....I do not believe that ontological categories can do justice to the freedom either of the divine or of the human person, or to the unity of the person in his involvement in and transcendence over the temporal flux or that the sin of man and the forgiveness by God of man's sin or the dramatic variety of man's history can be comprehended in ontological categories.[154]

Similarly, he argued that Barth's emphasis on Biblical revelation allowed no meaningful place for historical experience. Niebuhr, perhaps not sufficiently taking into account the

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[153] See on all three points NDII, especially chapters I, II, and X; *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York: Scribner's, 1952); or *The Self and the Dramas of History* (New York: Scribner's, 1955).

[154] RN, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism (section dealing with Professors Brunner and Tillich)," *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious Social and Political Thought*, p. 509. For more extended critique of ontological philosophies vis a vis Niebuhr's understanding of Hebraic philosophy, see *The Self and the Dramas of History* (New York: Scribner's, 1955), esp. chapter 13.

crucial role history played in Barth's formulation of distinct realms of nature and grace, was critical of Barth's 'dogmatism'.[155]

iii) The dynamic aspect

Christian realism also preserves the irreducible unity between theology and ethics. On one level, this was exemplified in Niebuhr's life, which was a constant whirlwind of activity:

> Niebuhr was always first a preacher, though he was always more than that: political organizer and commentator, religious thinker, social critic, seminary teacher... Forty or more weekends a year, for more than a quarter century, he bolted from one state to another, preaching at colleges, addressing student conferences, conferring at political meetings.[156]

More fundamentally, however, an emphasis on praxis permeates his entire work, which ranges from sustained theological and social analysis to sermons to innumerable articles addressing concrete issues and problems. As John Bennett argues:

> To understand Niebuhr's though we must move back and forth between his books, which provide the theological frame for his thought, and his articles and editorials, which show his response to contemporary events. The chief reason for this is that the dialectical structure of his thought as a whole often leaves us with a delicate balance between opposite positions which are

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[155] See the discussion in Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, pps. 117 and 164-5. Fox here makes the error of mistaking Niebuhr's contextuality for liberalism. For example, (p. 165) "Niebuhr could not have stomached the thought: his faith was shot through with the very liberalism that he flailed at and caricatured. Like Dewey he was a pragmatist, a relativist, and a pluralist at heart. He hated absolutism of any kind." Also see references to Barth in Ursula Niebuhr ed., *Remembering Reinhold Niebuhr*.

[156] Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, p. viii.

> brilliantly criticized, and it is only in the light of his concrete decisions for action that we can be sure where his emphasis finally lies. These concrete decisions are found chiefly in his articles and editorials. They reveal a man who in practice spends very little time in a state of dialectical balance but who comes down frequently on one side or another of particular issues. The dialectic still shows through in the accompanying ideas which qualify his decisions without annulling them.[157]

The value and meaning of theological reflection for Niebuhr was largely determined by its *ethical* relevance to the context it addressed. In other words, his theology is intended to inform and support, rather than replace, concrete participation:

> The Christian Gospel which transcends all particular and contemporary social situations can be preached with power only by a Church which bears its share of the burdens of immediate situations in which men are involved, burdens of establishing peace, of achieving justice, and of perfecting justice in the spirit of love. Thus is the kingdom of God which is not of this world made relevant to every problem of the world.[158]

4.3.3) Commitment: the *Christian* in Christian realism

Niebuhr's methodology, I have argued, exemplifies the definition of contextuality as critical world-commitment. It is both consistent and rigorous in its effort to be realistic about the world. Its emphasis on praxis and the necessity of ethical engagement proceeds from this realism. Yet something lies behind this ongoing capacity to be realistic without

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[157] John C. Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethics," *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought*, pp. 100-101.

[158] RN, from "The Christian Church in a Secular Age" as quoted in Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, p. 63.

falling into despair and to act without denying the incompleteness of all human endeavour. It cannot be described as an emotional adherence to ideas, belief in metaphysics or assent to theoretical propositions. Each of these requires a perspective which is in some way *anti*-contextual and which in some way attempts to obscure the ambiguity and complexity of empirical existence. Each ultimately lacks the resilience which is demanded by critical world-commitment.

What compels and sustains the endeavour of Christian realism is, rather, faith in the meaning which is both within and beyond empirical life. The hope which is one principal attribute of this faith springs from the partial revelation of meaning given in God's historical self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. The love which is the other springs from recognition of God's ongoing commitment to the world. In Niebuhr's words:

> In a sense we are saved by hope, in that we believe not only in the goodness of life, but we believe in the meaningfulness of the great drama of life. This is the distinctive point of what we call biblical religion....We do not have to flee from history into eternity, but eternity is a quality which is gained by faith and love in history.[159]

> Thus wisdom about our destiny is dependent upon a humble recognition of the limits of our knowledge and our power. Our most reliable understanding is the fruit of "grace" in which faith completes our ignorance without pretending to possess its certainties as knowledge; and in which contrition mitigates our pride without destroying our hope.[160]

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[159] RN, "We See Through a Glass Darkly," in *Justice and Mercy*, ed. Ursula M. Niebuhr (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 35.

[160] RN, NDII, chapter X, section IV, p. 321.

CHAPTER V
NIEBUHR'S DOCTRINE OF SIN: A CONTEXTUAL READING

In this chapter I will first briefly discuss the contextual realities which Niebuhr's conception of sin was intended to engage. I will then turn to a contextual analysis of his doctrine of sin.

5.1) The Context

Niebuhr's age has been described as *Promethean*;[161] it spans, among other things, a Depression, two devastating world wars, the Holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Vietnam, the Cold War, inexorable scientific and technological "progress" and the threat of nuclear annihilation. Its representative figures include Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin. In the United States, individuals such as Harry Truman, Joseph McCarthy and Henry Ford exemplified a more subtle kind of hubris. Human self-aggrandizement and its epic, staggering and tragic consequences were contextual leitmotifs.

Most commentators on Niebuhr's theology, including his feminist critics, have observed that his concerns were with the powerful.[162] Ruurd Veldhuis, for example, comments:

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[161] I am indebted for this description to D.J. Hall.

[162] See John C. Raines, "Sin as Pride and Sin as Sloth," *Christianity and Crisis*, February 3, 1969, pp. 4-8; Aurelia Takacs Fule, "Being Human Before God: Reinhold Niebuhr in Feminist Mirrors," *Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971): A Centenary Appraisal*, especially pp. 34-36; Judith Vaughan, *Sociality, Ethics and Social Change: A Critical Appraisal of Reinhold Niebuhr's Ethics in the Light of Rosemary Radford Ruether's Works* (Lanham, MD.: University Press of America, 1983). For an excellent and extended analysis of the concept of power in Niebuhr's theology see Larry Rasmussen, "Reinhold Niebuhr: Ethics and Power," *Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971): A Centenary Appraisal*, eds. D. Hall & G. Gaudin (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), especially sections I ('The Contours of Niebuhr's Mind') and II ('Niebuhr's Theory of Power').

> Niebuhr has rightly been called a prophet to the strong. His criticism primarily assails the illusions of the powerful.[163]

Plaskow, in reference to John Raines' analysis, states:

> As an apologist for Christianity in an newly emergent United States, says Raines, Niebuhr was concerned with the hypocrisy of the powerful; his is a theology for the strong.[164]

Saiving observes:

> ...the prevalent theologies today were created by men who lived amid the tensions of a hypermasculine culture. What is usually called the "modern era" in Western civilization.... can be called the "masculine age par excellence," in the sense that it emphasized, encouraged and set free precisely those aspects of human nature which are peculiarly significant to men.[165]

These observations about Niebuhr's contextual themes are, however, not developed or explored in the feminist analysis past the point of arguing that Niebuhr was a product of his age, and that his failure lies in mistaking contextual for universal realities.[166] Yet if Niebuhr is *deliberately* contextual, then the fact that his theology addresses the powerful may be more intentional, coherent and explicit than his critics have assumed.

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[163] Ruurd Veldhuis, *Realism versus Utopianism? Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism and the Relevance of Utopian Thought for Social Ethics* (Assen, The Netherlands: van Gorcum & Co., 1975), p. 49.

[164] Plaskow, p. 68. See also John C. Raines, "Sin as Pride and Sin as Sloth," *op. cit.*

[165] Saiving, p. 107.

[166] *Ibid.*

5.2) The Doctrine

5.2.1) Preconditions of Sin

The precondition of sin in Niebuhr's doctrine--as correctly read by the feminists--is anxiety. Niebuhr's conception of anxiety closely follows Kierkegaard's. It is particularly defined as anxiety *about* freedom and finitude; it is the self's initial response to recognition of its paradoxical composite.[167] Anxiety is as much the architect of human creativity as of sin. But the 'good' it leads to is intermingled with and not so easily distinguished from the 'bad'.[168] Although ideally faith in God would prevent anxiety,[169] sin as its result is virtually inevitable. The inevitability of sin as the response to anxiety, however, does not eliminate human responsibility for it.[170]

The sin anxiety leads to originally takes the form of (i) denial of finitude and (ii) attempts to obscure finitude: "[Man's] sin...is always partly an effort to obscure his blindness by overestimating the degree of his sight and to obscure his insecurity by stretching his power beyond its limits."[171] In other words, anxiety leads to pride.[172]

Anxiety for Niebuhr is a property of the human composite's spiritual realm.[173] This so far is compatible with the feminist reading. But the divergence in the contextual reading occurs in the relationship between anxiety and human nature. That is, the feminist reading assumes such anxiety to be a *first order* result of the definition of human ontology

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[167] See RN, NDI, chapter VII, section II. See especially p. 182 and p. 182, n. 2, for the similarities between Niebuhr's and Kierkegaard's descriptions.

[168] RN, NDI, chapter VII, section II, pp. 183-186.

[169] *Ibid.*, p. 183.

[170] RN, NDI, chapter IX, sections IV and V.

[171] RN, NDI, chapter VII, section II, p. 181.

[172] Sensuality as a form of sin which is secondary to pride will be discussed in section 2.4 of this chapter.

[173] "Anxiety is the internal precondition of sin. It is the inevitable *spiritual* state of man, standing in the paradoxical situation of freedom and finiteness." NDI, chapter VII, section II, p. 182. Italics mine.

as dual; it assumes that anxiety is a property of dualism itself.[174] Yet if we consider the *process* by which the self becomes anxious for Niebuhr, we will find that anxiety also has preconditions.[175]

Spirit for Niebuhr is defined as *freedom.*[176] Freedom has two dimensions: (i) the self's capacity to stand outside or transcend the world and (ii) the self's capacity to stand outside or transcend *itself.*

> That man stands outside the world is admitted by rationalists...but the rationalists do not always understand that man's rational capacity involves a further ability to stand outside himself, a capacity for self-transcendence...[177]

> The self knows the world, insofar as it knows the world, because it stands outside both itself and the world, which means that it cannot understand itself except as it is understood from beyond itself and the world.[178]

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[174] i.e., Saiving, p. 101.: "The human condition, according to many contemporary theologians, is universally characterized by anxiety..."; Hampson, p. 46.: "Kierkegaard, in *The Concept of Dread* and elsewhere, says that man is a double, both tied-to-nature and spirit...It is this duality...which gives rise to anxiety... Niebuhr, taking this as a given..."; Nelson Dunfee: "This anxiety over holding one's life together is innate to the human situation, for Niebuhr understands human nature to be by definition dipolar--as holding in tension the two poles of finitude and freedom."; Plaskow, p. 54.: "...the occasion for sin [in Niebuhr's doctrine] is nothing less than human nature itself."

[175] This is an understandable error, as these preconditions are treated in the category of the self, where Niebuhr draws on Augustine, Kierkegaard and Scheler, rather than in the context of what leads into sin. See NDI, chapter I, especially section III, and chapter VI. Augustine, Kierkegaard and Scheler are discussed in NDI, chapter VI.

[176] See chapter one, section 1 of this paper or RN, NDI, chapter II, part III, for detailed analysis.

[177] RN, NDI, chapter I, section I, p. 4.

[178] RN, NDI, chapter I, section III, p. 14. See chapter VI, section II of NDI for extended discussion on this point.

It is the second dimension which is important here. The self, in order to become anxious about its duality and finitude, must first *recognize* its duality and finitude. Such recognition occurs through the spirit's experience of self-transcendence:

> Man is the only animal which can make itself its own object. This capacity for self-transcendence which distinguishes spirit in man from soul (which he shares with animal existence), is the basis of discrete individuality, for this self-consciousness involves consciousness of the world as "the other."[179]

> ...Man as spirit transcends the temporal and natural process in which he is involved and also transcends himself. Thus his freedom is the basis of his creativity but it is also his temptation.[180]

Recognition of the self's paradoxical status involves both awareness of radical freedom and its responsibility (spirit), and awareness of the limits of a finite existence (nature).[181] It is only *after* such recognition occurs that anxiety results:

> Since he is involved in the contingencies and necessities of the natural process on the one hand, and since, on the other, he stands outside of them, *and foresees their caprices and perils*, he is anxious.[182]

> It is not [man's] finiteness, dependence and weakness but his anxiety about it which tempts him to sin.[183]

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[179] NDI, chapter III, section I, p. 55.

[180] RN, NDI, chapter IX, section IV, p. 252.

[181] RN, NDI, chapter VI.

[182] RN, NDI, chapter IX, section IV, p. 251. Italics mine.

[183] RN, NDI, chapter VI, section III, p. 168.

The experience of self-transcendence, therefore, can be understood as a prerequisite of (i) recognition of duality and finitude, (ii) the resulting temptation of anxiety and (iii) the reaction of sin. Niebuhr argues that the dimension of spirit in human nature has the capacity for self-transcendence.[184] But what elicits or actualizes the experience of it? What, in other words, is the precondition for self-transcendence?

Niebuhr defines self-transcendence as "the consciousness of consciousness."[185] What becomes clear on analysis is that self-transcendence in his definition necessarily requires both a *prior* and a *concomitant* self-consciousness or awareness. How can self-transcendence occur *without* self-consciousness? How, that is, without *awareness* of self, can the self be aware of what it transcends? Niebuhr explains the relation of consciousness to transcendence in these ways:

> As consciousness is the principle of transcendence over process, so self-consciousness is the principle of transcending consciousness.[186]

> *Self*-consciousness represents a further degree of transcendence in which the self makes itself its own object in such a way that the ego is finally always subject and not object.[187]

> He [Kierkegaard] writes: "The determining factor in the self is consciousness, *i.e.* self consciousness. *The more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness the more will, the more will, the more self...*"[188]

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[184] See the passages referred to in notes 176 and 178 above.

[185] NDI, chapter III, section V, p. 72.

[186] RN, NDI, chapter III, section VI, p. 75.

[187] NDI, chapter I, section III, p. 14. Italics mine.

[188] NDI, chapter VI, section III, p. 171. Italics mine.

Consistent awareness or consciousness of self must be understood, therefore, as both a necessary precondition for and a defining characteristic of the kind of radical self-transcendence Niebuhr requires for the steps which lead into sin. I am taking *self-consciousness* here to mean something like the self recognizing itself as (i) distinct and individual; (ii) free; and (iii) capable of exercising ongoing agency.[189] As Niebuhr puts it:

> Man is *self-determining* not only in the sense that he transcends natural process in such a way as to be able to choose between various alternatives presented to him by the processes of nature but also in the sense that he transcends himself in such a way that he must choose his total end.[190]

Anxiety, then, can be read in Niebuhr's analysis as not a *first* but a *fourth* order consequence of human nature. While it is the precondition for sin, it *also* has preconditions, which become important--crucial--for a contextual understanding of the doctrine. Because an assumption is made that Niebuhr was making a universal claim about anxiety and pride, the feminist analysis neglects the complexity of the factors which initially trigger the self towards anxiety. It neglects, in other words, analysis of the *kind* of self he was addressing.

To sum up, the stages which lead to the sin of pride can be elaborated as follows: (i) consistent self-awareness or self-consciousness and awareness of freedom and agency is required for (ii) self-transcendence, which leads to (iii) recognition of duality and finitude, which results in (iv) anxiety, which leads to (v) the sin of pride. The feminist reading neglects step (i) altogether and conflates steps (ii) and (iii) as ancillary characteristics of anxiety (iv), which is the precondition of sin (v). The contextual reading treats steps (i) to (iii) as independent preconditions of the anxiety (iv) which leads into the sin of pride (v).

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[189] See on the relation between self-as-agent and the contemplative or transcendent self, NDI, chapter IX, section V, p. 259.

[190] RN, NDI, chapter VI, section II, p. 163. Italics mine.

5.2.2) The Empowered and the Powerless

Because the process which leads the individual into sin requires a self-conscious self, and given Niebuhr's contextual concerns with power, I am arguing that he makes an implicit distinction, which I will now make explicit, between the empowered and the powerless. By an *empowered* self I mean simply that self which is consistently self-conscious (in the sense defined above) and which has consistently experienced self-transcendence, recognition of duality and finitude and the resulting anxiety. In other words, my definition of an empowered self is that self which has met Niebuhr's preconditions for the sin of pride. My definition of a *powerless* self is that self which does not, for various reasons, meet these preconditions.[191] I am using this distinction and these terms to parallel the feminist definitions of and distinctions between masculine and feminine sin. I think that this is more illuminating of Niebuhr's analysis for several reasons.

First, the innate ambiguities of distinguishing between *masculine* and *feminine* while divorcing these terms from gender make 'sex/gender'-free terminology a less problematic choice. Both Plaskow and Saiving, for example, point out that masculine and feminine forms of sin are not limited to their respective sexes.[192] Both address the difficulties of distinguishing nature and culture in this connection.[193] Yet subsequent discussion in all four feminist analyses is limited to what feminine sin would mean for *women*. No attempt

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[191] I will discuss the powerless self in more detail in section 2.4. of this chapter.

[192] *i.e.*, Plaskow: "Third, I do not wish to argue that the experiences I describe as "women's experiences" are only women's experiences. By focusing on women's experience, we call attention to aspects of the human situation which might otherwise escape our notice." (p. 5-6); "It would be neither profitable nor true to experience, however, to suggest that women are incapable of pride, or, more important, that sensuality is only a female sin." (p. 68); Saiving: "It is my contention that there are significant differences between masculine and feminine experience and that feminine experience reveals in a more emphatic fashion certain aspects of the human situation which are present but less obvious in the experience of men." (p. 101).

[193] Saiving: "But can we speak meaningfully about feminine experience as something fundamentally different from masculine experience?... Are not all distinctions between the sexes, except the purely biological ones, relative to a given culture?" (p. 101). Plaskow's entire first chapter, "Women's Experience" (pp. 9-50) discusses this issue.

is made to describe what feminine sin as lack of or negation of self would mean in a non-gender specific sense. Empowered and powerless thus have the advantage of being terms which can include, but are not limited to, issues of gender and sex.

Also, because Niebuhr's analysis is directed towards a Promethean context where abuse of power is the norm, using these terms clarifies the direction of his doctrine of sin in a way that gender-specific terms would not. Niebuhr was using *man* as a generic term, which is an unfortunate but nearly universal fact of pre-gender inclusive academic and theological literature. Thus to attempt to distinguish when he is authentically talking about 'human'; when he is talking specifically about men and when he *thinks* he is talking about human but is really talking about men, would be a hopeless and confusing task. Empowered and powerless are clearer because they are closer, as I intend to demonstrate further, to his intention and analysis.

5.2.3) Pride

Pride, for Niebuhr, is the primary form of sin. As was pointed out in the introduction to chapter IV, not one of Niebuhr's feminist critics argues that his conception of pride is in itself erroneous. All agree, rather, that it is extremely apposite as a description of masculine sin.[194] The objection is to his claim that pride is universally primary.[195] If *empowered* is not a problematic substitute for *masculine*, however, then this objection may be resting on a mistaken assumption about the extent of Niebuhr's claim.

Niebuhr is criticized for the error of giving restricted examples of what is supposed to be for him a universal sin:

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[194] See Saiving, p. 106; Plaskow, p. 51; Hampson, pp. 47 and 51-52; Nelson Dunfee, p. 322.

[195] See Saiving, p. 101; Plaskow, p. 6; Hampson, p. 47; Nelson Dunfee, p. 324.

> It is ironic in retrospect that Niebuhr wanted to relate his doctrine of sin "to the observable behaviour of *men*" and that all his examples of sinful pride are either individual men or male-governed nations.[196]

Yet if we take these descriptions of pride at face value-- as intentional rather than as evidence of an unconsciously limited perspective-- it is patent that each assumes explicitly--even exaggeratedly--empowered selves or states. For example, Niebuhr illustrates the two conditions--smugness and insecurity--which can engender the pride of power:

> In modern international life Great Britain with its too strong a sense of security, which prevented it from taking proper measures of defense in time, and Germany with its maniacal will-to-power, are perfect symbols of the different forms which pride takes....[197]

Descartes, Hegel, Kant, Comte and Marxist schools are cited as examples of the philosopher's absolutistic tendency to elaborate definitive--*final*--systems of thought, which is indicative of intellectual pride.[198] Both the Catholic and Protestant churches, as well as Luther's attitude towards Schwenkfeld, and Calvin's towards Castellio and Servetus, are cited as examples of spiritual pride.[199] In all cases, a certain *type* of individual, state or institution is being described. The feminist theologians describe them as uniformly--but accidentally--*masculine*. On the contextual reading, they are uniformly--and *deliberately*--empowered.

Given the explicitly empowered status of Niebuhr's concrete examples of pride, therefore, in conjunction with the contextual emphasis of his theology in general, we can

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[196] Plaskow, p. 68.

[197] NDI, chapter VII, section III, n. 7.

[198] See NDI, chapter VII, section III, pp. 194-197.

[199] *Ibid.*, pp. 200-203.

begin to question the feminist assumption that Niebuhr considered all people in all contexts to be universally infected with this kind of sin. An equally plausible conclusion is that empowerment, in the sense defined above, is a prerequisite for the sin of pride. On the contextual reading, therefore, a universal claim that pride is primary for all people is displaced by the more restrained assertion that pride is the primary form of sin in the empowered. *No individual who is empowered*, that is, *is immune to pride.*

5.2.4) Sensuality

The reverse side of the critique that Niebuhr makes pride primary is that he makes sensuality secondary, and that his conception of sensuality, which initially promises to encompass what the feminist theologians refer to as women's sin, is underdeveloped as a result. To reiterate briefly, Niebuhr is criticized in the feminist analysis for claiming that sensuality succeeds pride; that "it always betrays some aspect of [an] abortive effort to solve the problem of finiteness and freedom."[200] He is specifically criticized by Plaskow and Nelson Dunfee for substituting an originally broad definition--denial of freedom[201]--with a much narrower conception--identification with desire and impulse[202]--in his detailed analysis.

Plaskow:

> Initially, he [Niebuhr] defines sensuality as the attempt to solve the contradiction of finiteness and freedom by denying freedom. This definition is much more faithful to his analysis of human nature than his definition of sensuality as "undue identification with...particular impulses and desires."[203]

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[200] NDI, chapter VII, section I, p. 179. Also see chapter 2, section 3 of this paper.

[201] See *ibid.*

[202] See NDI, chapter VII, section III, p. 228.

[203] Plaskow, pp. 62-63. Discussion of this point continues until page 68.

Nelson Dunfee:

> Hence, from his broader understanding of the sin of hiding as the escape *from* one's freedom, he narrows his focus to the "forms of physical desire," thus turning his emphasis from hiding to sensuality.[204]

But is Niebuhr's more detailed description of denial of freedom a narrower substitution? Or is it, rather, a deliberate and logical step? I am arguing that critique of the subordinate nature of sensuality in the feminist analysis arises from an initially fallacious definition of the term. That is, although Plaskow and Nelson Dunfee refer to the deliberate nature of sensuality in their discussion (the term *denial* itself already implies conscious intent), neither recognize this as a crucial characteristic of Niebuhr's definition. In the subsequent attempt to make Niebuhr's understanding of sensuality convertible with what is termed either "women's sin" or "the sin of hiding," therefore, two distinct kinds of loss of freedom--*willed* and *unwilled*--are erroneously conflated.[205] Because Niebuhr argues that sensuality proceeds from prior self-aggrandizement or pride, it also satisfies the preconditions of that form of sin: an antecedent self-consciousness, self-transcendence, recognition of finitude and anxiety. It occurs *after* recognition of the self's radical freedom and responsibility and *after* a prior unsuccessful attempt to extend that freedom. The sensuality which succeeds pride is, in other words, willed. The freedom which is rejected is recognized as such; it is rejected because that freedom could not be made absolute. Willed sensuality is a condition of the self which responds to the failure of overcoming nature by burying itself in nature.

All of Niebuhr's descriptions of sensuality explicitly involve deliberate self-loss or fragmentation. He refers to

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[204] Nelson Dunfee, p. 318. Her discussion of this point continues onto page 319.

[205] See Plaskow, pp. 63-68; Nelson Dunfee, pp. 318-320; Hampson, pp. 47-50. Plaskow and Hampson specifically base their description of women's sin and its relation to Niebuhr's understanding of sensuality on Saiving's initial characterization (Saiving, p. 108-109); Nelson Dunfee terms women's sin 'the sin of hiding' and defines it without reference to Saiving's description.

> The sins of sensuality, as expressed for instance in sexual license, gluttony, extravagance, drunkenness and abandonment to various forms of physical desire...[206]

He then goes on to illustrate how these sins represent the two aspects of sensuality: "a form of idolatry which makes the self god" and "an alternative idolatry in which the self, conscious of the inadequacy of its self-worship, seeks escape by finding some other god."[207] He concludes:

> Whether in drunkenness, gluttony, sexual license, love of luxury, or any inordinate devotion to a mutable good, sensuality is always: (1) an extension of self-love to the point where it defeats its own ends; (2) an effort to escape the prison house of self by finding a god in a process or person outside the self; and (3) finally an effort to escape from the confusion which sin has created into some form of unconscious existence.[208]

Here again, let us take at face value what is assumed by Niebuhr's critics to be the error of a limited perspective. Instead of concluding that his notion of sensuality, while *meant* as universal, is inaccurately narrow, we will examine whether the definition fulfils the role that he assigns it. That is:

(i) Because for Niebuhr sensuality is *secondary* to pride, the initial conditions for sin, as elaborated in section A, are fulfilled. The individual who capitulates into sensuality is already empowered. Both the radical freedom of self-transcendence and its concomitant responsibility are recognized and rejected. The choice is therefore conscious.

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[206] NDI, chapter VIII, section III, p. 228.

[207] *Ibid.*, p. 233. The discussion continues to page 240.

[208] *Ibid.*, p. 240.

(ii) The claim that inordinate devotion to a mutable good is deliberate is consistent with the claim that such devotion is a reaction to a prior failed attempt at self-aggrandizement. The failure to make freedom absolute, in other words, is *a good enough reason* to decide to deny it altogether.

(iii) The fact that all the manifestations of sensuality cited by Niebuhr are willed is consistent with his claim that sensuality is both a distinct choice and secondary to the sin of pride. The definition and the examples, in other words, jibe: they describe a *type* of self-destruction which, because deliberate, plausibly proceeds from a prior awareness of finitude and a subsequent failed attempt to deny it.

The correlative of willed sensuality--unwilled sensuality--takes two forms: (i) unwilled self-fragmentation and (ii) unwilled non-self-realization. The first refers to already consistently empowered selves whose agency or freedom is taken away from them; the second refers to selves which have never, for external reasons, consistently experienced empowerment. An example of the first would be someone interned in a concentration camp; an example of the second would be someone born into systemic poverty or oppression. Both, on the contextual reading, would be subsumed under the rubric *powerless* as introduced in section 5.2.2.

I concur with the feminist claim that Niebuhr does not address these two forms of self-negation in his treatment of sensuality. But I am arguing that his omission is the result of a presupposition very much different from the error of universalizing a limited perspective. I am arguing that these two forms of self-negation are not treated in his definition of sensuality *because for Niebuhr they do not represent sin.* More specifically, on the contextual reading, unwilled self-fragmentation and unwilled non-self-realization are not sin for Niebuhr, because:

(i) a precondition for sin--namely, empowerment[209]--is not met;

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[209] In the case of unwilled self-fragmentation, the condition of empowerment is not met specifically during the period of repression and possibly afterwards. In the case of unwilled non-self-realization, the condition of empowerment has never been met.

(ii) a precondition for sensuality--namely, the sin of pride and a failed attempt at denial of finitude--cannot be met;

(iii) agency is denied by external constraints, rather than being deliberate or willed;

(iv) neither his definition of sensuality, nor his concrete examples of it in any way encompass or describe these instances.

The second form of powerlessness is, as I intend to demonstrate in chapter six, almost wholly consistent with what the feminist theologians refer to as "women's sin." But if the two forms of unwilled sensuality are not sin for Niebuhr, then what are they? I am arguing that for Niebuhr unwilled self-fragmentation and unwilled non-self realization are *consequences* of sin. They are evidence, that is, of injustice.

Injustice[210] for Niebuhr is the moral dimension of sin; it is inextricably joined to sin as its moral result:

> The moral and social dimension of sin is injustice. The ego which falsely makes itself the centre of existence in its pride and will-to-power inevitably subordinates other life to its will and thus does injustice to other life.[211]

Because of the inevitability of sin's manifestation as abuse of power, Niebuhr consistently advocates the right of the powerless or oppressed to overcome their oppression--even to the extent of violent revolution.[212] Society--"a realm of power blocs to be adjusted, not a

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[210] As satisfactory treatment of Niebuhr's concept of justice is beyond the scope of this paper, I will only briefly touch on themes which are relevant to the status of the powerless in this connection.

[211] RN, NDI, chapter VII, section I, p. 179.

[212] See on the right of oppressed groups to revolt, the legitimate use of coercion in the pursuit of justice and the ambiguity of power in as manifest in ruling/oppressed group relations, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Scribner's, 1932). Niebuhr later modified some of the perspectives presented in this book, notably his understanding of Marxism. His arguments for coercion in the pursuit of justice and his understanding of power as an inevitable fact of social relations, however, remained consistent in later works.

garden in need of regeneration"[213]--continually requires examination and redress in the interest of justice. Niebuhr argues that a ruling group will (i) always arrogate to itself more privileges than it deserves and (ii) always use coercion, either overt or covert, to maintain the *status quo* imbalance of power. Consequently, the use of coercion to adjust power in their favour is a fundamental right of the oppressed. As Aurelia Takacs Fule observes,

> His [Niebuhr's] active support of unions and the civil rights movement convinces us that he would aid women's liberation. He would advise women in terms similar to his advice to Blacks in the 1950's, *not to wait for men to share power.*[214]

Also, because no group ever voluntarily relinquishes power, participation in the correction of injustice, even to the extent of using force, is a Christian responsibility. If Christians do not recognize the legitimacy of force in certain situations then they must withdraw from political society altogether or risk identification with the covert force used by the ruling group to maintain the *status quo*. Political and ethical responsibility requires a "judicious use of the forces of nature in the service of the ideal."[215]

For Niebuhr, however, advocating the *rights* of the oppressed to adjust power in their favour does not mean idealizing the powerless or universalizing their perspective. It does not mean espousing utopian solutions or assuming that the oppressed will not exhibit the same sin as the empowered when empowered.[216] This final fallacy is "the self-

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[213] Niebuhr, as quoted in Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, p. 140.

[214] Takacs Fule, "Being Human Before God," p. 71. Italics mine.

[215] RN, "Must We Do Nothing?" *The Christian Century*, Volume XLIX, Number 13 (March 30, 1932), p. 417. As quoted in Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, p. 133.

[216] See for arguments against idealization of a particular class, *Reflections on the End of an Era* (New York: Scribner's, 1934). See for arguments against utopianism, *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940).

righteousness of the weak in distinction to the self-righteousness of the powerful."[217] That is,

> ... when the "poor" are blessed with historical success and acquire the power of a 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.[218]

> One of the pathetic aspects of human history is that the instruments of judgement which it uses to destroy particular vices must belong to the same category of the vice to be able to destroy it. Thus some evil, which is to be destroyed, is always transferred to the instrument of its destruction and thereby perpetuated.[219]

To assume that the powerless or oppressed are somehow more noble because of their oppression, therefore, is evidence of both wilful naiveté and condescension. Yet to allow such knowledge to work against acting on their behalf, is sin.[220] That is, realistic assessment of all human endeavour as partially self-interested does not result for Niebuhr in a cynicism which arrests the ceaseless, active search for proximate justice. His refusal to idealize the powerless, rather than precluding ethical activity towards their emancipation, consistently drove him towards more forceful and authoritative arguments for social change. He states:

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[217] Niebuhr, as quoted in Aurelia Takacs Fule, p. 35.

[218] RN, *Justice and Mercy*, op. cit., p. 30.

[219] RN, *Reflections on the End of an Era*, p. 94.

[220] The sin of willed sensuality: in this case, capitulation to despair or pessimism as a result of the failure to institute a perfect social order.

> There are therefore obligations to realize justice in indeterminate degrees; but none of the realizations can assure the serenity of perfect fulfilment.... Higher realization of historic justice would be possible if it were more fully understood that all such realizations contain contradictions to, as well as approximations of, the ideal of love. Sanctification in the realm of social relations demands recognition of the impossibility of perfect sanctification.[221]

5.3) Summary

I have attempted in this chapter to give a contextual reading of Niebuhr's doctrine of sin. As I stated in section one, Niebuhr's context was Promethean in the sense that human pretension and abuse of power were contextual norms. Ironically, the dominant mood of his context was a liberalism which maintained an absurd sense of optimism precisely through failure--or refusal--to acknowledge this menacing Promethean theme. Liberalism disparaged the idea of sin: sin was anti-rational, anti-progress. Liberalism eschewed analysis of power because it clung to a self-serving belief in an approaching historical utopia, which could function without reference to anything as vulgar--or realistic--as power relations. Such optimism in the face of the Holocaust was monstrous, as well as anti-contextual.

Niebuhr *discerned* his context by recognizing the rampancy of human self-aggrandizement and linking such arrogance to sin. The realism in Christian realism enabled him to penetrate the liberal march-of-progress fog and identify the danger and scope of human pretension. He *engaged* his context by (i) giving a sustained and detailed examination of power; (ii) emphasizing the primacy of pride as sin in the empowered; (iii) clarifying the relation between sinfulness, abuse of power and injustice and (iv) articulating the deliberate denial of freedom as sin in sensuality. Yet the most revealing sign of Niebuhr's contextuality is the *commitment* to context which his doctrine demonstrates. Niebuhr's views were not popular: he was consistently labelled a pessimist, a defeatist, a cynic. His notoriety issued precisely from the perceived outrageousness of his views. In spite of his revilement,

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[221] RN, NDII, chapter IX, section II, pp. 246-247.

Niebuhr persisted by further penetrating his contextual darkness. He emerged with an analysis that was critical and a hope that was authentic rather than comforting illusion.

CHAPTER VI
THE FEMINIST CRITIQUE RECONSIDERED

The specific points of the feminist critique have been examined through a contextual lens in the previous chapter. I will now provide (i) a detailed analysis of women's sin, (ii) examine the subsidiary critique of grace and give the contextual response and (iii) discuss both the relevance and lack of relevance Niebuhr's analysis has for the feminist perspective.

6.1) Women's Sin

Women's sin is initially described by Valerie Saiving as "underdevelopment or negation of the self."[222] Judith Plaskow amplifies this description into a definition: "the failure to take responsibility for self-actualization."[223] Susan Nelson Dunfee calls it "hiding"; "the sin of having no self to sacrifice."[224] Daphne Hampson calls it "a failure [of the woman] to come to herself."[225]

Plaskow describes in detail the kind of self affected with women's sin through reference, as I have mentioned, to the fictive heroine, Martha Quest.[226] Here are some ways in which she describes women's sin as manifest in Martha:

> Martha's sin... is precisely that she has no self; *she has not yet become a self...*[227]

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[222] Saiving, p. 109.

[223] Plaskow, p. 3.

[224] Nelson Dunfee, p. 317 and p. 324, respectively.

[225] Hampson, p. 49.

[226] See note 68 for bibliographic details.

[227] Plaskow, pp. 66-67. Italics mine.

> The point is precisely that she has no self to sacrifice.[228]

Plaskow does refer to what she calls "moments of transcendence" in Martha,[229] which are characterized by Martha's experience of "the watcher." But these moments are distinctly more like recognition of *alienation* than recognition of freedom. They are "brief, flickering, only partially understood and quickly forgotten."[230] She elaborates:

> There is always a conflict between the passive compliant Martha who enacts a socially predetermined role and "the watcher," the core of her self that feels totally alienated from the life she is living.[231]

Saiving takes such alienation to its logical conclusion:

> ...she can become merely an emptiness, almost a zero, without value to herself, to her fellow men, or, perhaps, even to God.[232]

It is my argument that what is called *women's sin* is *not* consistent with Niebuhr's conception of sensuality which I have called, in the interests of clarity, *willed* sensuality. Willed sensuality, as was argued, fulfils the same conditions for sin as pride because it succeeds it. The self afflicted with women's sin, as is consistently argued by all four feminist theologians, has never experienced the self-aggrandizing will-to-power which characterizes pride. This argument, in fact, is the foundation of the entire critique. But because it is not familiar with the sin of pride, such a self cannot experience Niebuhr's form

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[228] Plaskow, p. 87.

[229] Plaskow, p. 44.

[230] Plaskow, p. 44.

[231] Plaskow, p. 40.

[232] Saiving, p. 108.

of sensuality, which is a *reaction* to the failure of the self's attempt to become absolute. Further, Niebuhr's examples of sensuality, all of which are deliberate (gluttony, drunkenness, etc.), are a long way from describing the involuntary self-negation which characterizes women's sin.

What is women's sin, in fact, is entirely consistent with *unwilled* non-self-realization, which is one form of unwilled sensuality or powerlessness. More specifically:

(i) The *anxiety* experienced by that kind of powerless self, like the self afflicted with women's sin, is not about duality, finitude and the limitations of power but about guilt over "desire to be a self."[233]

(ii) The *recognition* experienced by that kind of powerless self, like the self afflicted with women's sin, is not of radical freedom through self-transcendence but of "alienation." It is recognition "of not being a self" rather than of the dizzying extent of its possibilities as a self.

(iii) The *consciousness* experienced by that kind of powerless self, like the self afflicted with women's sin, is not of being *distinct and individual* but diffused;[234] of tending to "surrender...self-identity and be included in another's "power of being.""[235] It is not of being *free* but dependent "on others for one's own self-definition."[236] It is not of *consistent awareness and exercise of agency* but of "total submission to husband/father/boss..."; of "a submerged existence."[237]

In other words, the self afflicted with women's sin, like the self afflicted with unwilled non-self-realization, has not experienced empowerment and so has not fulfilled Niebuhr's conditions for sin. All the examples of women's sin given describe an incipient

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[233] Nelson Dunfee, p. 322.

[234] Saiving, p. 109.

[235] Saiving, p. 108.

[236] Saiving, p. 109.

[237] Nelson Dunfee, p. 322.

and chronic lack of self-awareness rather than a deliberate *no* to radical freedom and its attendant responsibilities after abortive absolutistic attempts (willed sensuality) or the self which has experienced a definite strike that externally removes its already consistently empowered status (unwilled self-fragmentation). The difference here is that for Niebuhr, the powerless self I have described is powerless because of systemic external constraints. Its predicament is therefore an issue of injustice. Yet for the feminists, women's situation, which parallels this powerless self in all other ways, is an issue of sin.

All four theologians make both implicit and explicit references to the structural constraints which patriarchal society places on women.

Saiving:

> ...women are being subjected to pressures from many sides to return to the traditional feminine niche and to devote themselves wholly to the tasks of nurture, support, and service of their families.[238]

Plaskow:

> This is the way you are, a firmly entrenched social mythology tells women, and this is the way you ought to be. The sum of expectations concerning women in Western society...is incorporated into the literature of every field, filters down through popular literature and the media, and is communicated to every child in endless ways from the moment it is born.[239]

Hampson:

> ...what women who are troubled (and not only those who are troubled) need, is to gain some sense of themselves. The society, the relations with men and within the family in which they live, have often dictated against this.[240]

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[238] Saiving, p. 110.

[239] Plaskow, p. 48.

[240] Hampson, p. 49.

Nelson Dunfee:

> And so, she is caught in her bondage to guilt: the guilt of desiring to be more fully human than the patriarchal culture tells her she should be; the guilt of being Eve, the seductress, the carnal one; and the deepest guilt of all, the guilt of not becoming a self.[241]

After such acknowledgement of systemic external oppression, to what end do the feminists treat its result, however complex or protracted, as sin? First, by calling it *women's* sin, the implication is that characteristics described in connection with it--"distractibility," "diffuseness," "triviality," "gossipy sociability" (!), subservience--are innate to female nature, which sounds alarmingly like the weaker sex arguments of patriarchal men. The further implication, perhaps more serious, is that structural subordination of women is simply their own fault. Would these theologians feel comfortable telling a woman that she is to blame for the fact that her wage is a third less than a man's for the same kind of work? For *Hustler* magazine, strip clubs and snuff films? For lack of funding for breast cancer research? For the fact that she can't walk alone at night without fear of getting harassed, assaulted or killed?

The difficulties of distinguishing innate feminine characteristics--if there *are* innate feminine characteristics--from those which are culturally imposed is obvious, and acknowledged specifically by Plaskow, Saiving and Hampson.[242] Instead of speculating about which constitutes which in women's oppressed state, however, isn't it more logical, straightforward and helpful to work towards the removal of cultural constraints which contribute to that state--of which there are many that are distinctly identifiable? This is not to say that the powerless--or women--are sin*less*. Rather, I am arguing that it is more appropriate to direct energy towards correcting their status than towards formulating a

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[241] Nelson Dunfee, p. 323.

[242] See Saiving, p. 101 and pp. 103-106; Plaskow, chapter 1, section A, pp. 12-28 and Hampson, pp. 49-50.

theory of their sin as the origin of it. The issue of justice, as far as the powerless are concerned, is more urgent than the issue of sin.

6.2) Grace

6.2.1) The Critique

The flaws in Niebuhr's doctrine of grace, for the feminists, are a direct result of his insistence on pride's primacy in his doctrine of sin. Grace responds *only* to the sin of pride. It consequently neglects the distinct problems which stem from women's sin or sensuality:

> The inadequacy in his treatment of sin is, if anything, compounded in the doctrine of grace, for Niebuhr treats grace only as a response to pride, setting aside his analysis of sensuality altogether.[243]

The repercussions of this lack of treatment for women are serious: essentially, grace is not directed towards them.[244] "There is no judgment upon the one who escapes; there is no call to emerge from the state of hiddenness."[245] Niebuhr's grace, it is argued, neither identifies women's sin as sin nor provides those submerged in this sin with a way to move beyond it.

More than being irrelevant to women, however, Niebuhr's conception of grace actually serves to *reinforce* women's sin. This, the most severe repercussion of his faulty analysis, has two dimensions. First, breaking or crucifying a self is hardly appropriate to those who have no, or very little, sense of self:

> The shattering of the self from beyond is received as grace only where the self's sin is pride and self-absorption. Where sin is not "too much" self but

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[243] Plaskow, p. 84.

[244] Plaskow, pp. 86-87.

[245] Nelson Dunfee, p. 321.

> lack of self, such shattering is at least irrelevant and possibly destructive rather than healing.[246]

Second and more critical, however, if grace serves to direct the sinful self into self-sacrificial love, then it is telling those afflicted with "women's sin" to persist in it; that their sin is convertible with their grace-filled ideal:

> Had he developed the possible forms of the sin of hiding more fully, Niebuhr would have realized that what he posits as humanity's highest virtue, the loss of self, is identical with the sin of hiding, the escape from oneself. The virtue and the sin are synonymous, and one must begin to wonder what the implications of such a contradiction are.[247]

6.2.2) The Contextual Response

The sin of pride occurs when the self tries to overstep its boundaries by claiming an exaggerated status for itself, invariably at the expense of others. It takes the form of some kind of will-to-power--personal, social, political, intellectual, spiritual--which attempts to secure false authority through an erroneous universalization of its perspective.

The sin of pride can be alternatively considered as the human tendency towards absolutism. Its moral dimension is the injustice of subordinating other life to its self-interested ends.

The sin of sensuality (willed, in my definition), conversely, deliberately capitulates to "inordinate devotion to a mutable good." This, as has been noted, can take the form of idolatry towards the self or idolatry towards some other mutable good in place of the self. Both forms exemplify a deliberate escape from the radical freedom and responsibility which proceed from the self's partially transcendent status. The sin of sensuality can be

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[246] Plaskow, p. 63.

[247] Nelson Dunfee, p. 321.

alternatively considered as the human tendency towards relativism. Its moral dimension is the failure to both acknowledge and use in the service of others the self's radical freedom and responsibility.

In both instances of sin something penultimate is placed, often with tragic consequences, in the place of the ultimate:[248]

> If a man does not know the truth about God, who is more than an extension of his self (a truth to be known only by faith), *he cannot repent of the premature and self-centered completion of his life around a partial and inadequate centre*.[249]

In the case of pride, the inadequate centre is the self--the self is sinfully *identified* with the ultimate. In the case of willed sensuality, the self sinfully *denies* the existence of the ultimate and devotes itself to some inadequate centre--either the self or some other mutable good.

Grace responds to both pride and willed sensuality by replacing the penultimate with what is authentically ultimate. The false self is shattered to create space for the form of grace.[250] Grace responds to pride by showing what is truly ultimate; it responds to sensuality by showing that there is a truly ultimate.[251] The form grace takes--the form of the ultimate--is, in both cases, Jesus Christ, who is the perfect expression of transcendence in the contingency of history.[252] This expression of the ultimate is also the function behind agape--or self-sacrificial love--as an ideal. In Christ and the Cross agape represents the authentic--and only--source of transcendent meaning as disclosed in history. Agape as an

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[248] My use of these terms assumes the definition given by Paul Tillich.

[249] RN, NDII, chapter IV, section II, p. 100. Italics mine.

[250] RN, NDII, chapter IV, section III, pp. 108-109.

[251] RN, NDII, chapter IV, section III, pp. 110-114.

[252] RN, NDII, chapter III, section III, especially part 2.

ideal responds to both pride and sensuality by turning the sinful self towards the other in authentic love. For pride, the emphasis is on agape as the true alternative to subordination of the other. For sensuality, the emphasis is agape as the true alternative to idolatry of the other.[253]

Niebuhr's doctrine of grace, by leading the individual to recognition of the ultimate while precluding identification with it, negotiates a contextual alternative to both the absolutism of pride and the relativism of willed sensuality. If unwilled sensuality--or "women's sin"--were sin for Niebuhr, then the feminist critique of his doctrine of grace would be correct: grace for the powerless ought to be self-actualization, which he failed to develop, rather than self-sacrificial love. Because "women's sin" is *not* sin for Niebuhr, the argument that Niebuhr's self-sacrificial love reinforces women in their sin is simply eradicated. Grace doesn't try to cure "women's sin" as sin. Its response to the powerless is not an issue of sanctification but of redressing the imbalance of power and striving to eliminate structural oppression. The exhortation to work towards justice is precisely what grace makes to the sinful empowered. It exhorts the prideful to turn away from the self towards the other in love. It exhorts the sensual to take responsibility for the other in a genuine--not idolatrous--way.

6.3) Relevance and the Lack of Relevance

Niebuhr's account of the primary sin in the empowered being pride was directed towards, and resulted from scrutiny of, a specific Promethean context. It can be argued that there is an extensive relevance to his claim which issues precisely from its contextuality. That is, his analysis of the ambiguity of power in a specific context has significance for *any* context where power is a fact, because where power is a fact, abuse of it is a possibility (for Niebuhr, a probability). What his contextual analysis serves to show is that *no-one* who is empowered is immune to pride. This means that no individual or collective on gaining access to power is immune to abusing it. To assume that the powerless will not exhibit the same sin as the empowered when empowered is simply unrealistic. Niebuhr refused to

[253] RN, NDII, chapter IV, section III.

idealize the oppressed because of their oppression, although this did not preclude him from striving for justice on their behalf.

Another way of stating this is that Niebuhr's analysis demonstrates that pride and power have no gender. Gender in this case is contingent, not necessary: while it is true that power in Niebuhr's context was almost entirely in male hands, such preponderance does not make power *male*. Neither, conversely, can powerlessness, on a number count, be classified as a specifically female trait. No *woman*, therefore who holds power is invulnerable to exploitation of it.

While Niebuhr's examination can guide feminist analysis in its own grapplings with power, it can also serve to illuminate the kind of systemic abuse feminists seek to overcome. Niebuhr's theology in general is like a map to the land of the strong. His doctrine of sin in particular is like an accompanying guidebook, with astute and incisive profiles of the bullies who are that country's most prominent citizens.

The analysis can also benefit from Niebuhr's treatment of what it calls "women's sin." I have already argued why I think such a condition is erroneously categorized by the feminists in section 1 of this chapter. For Niebuhr "women's sin" was, rather than sin, an injustice which results from it. *Where* he treated this condition is itself significant. *How* he treated it is also important. An emphasis on praxis underlies Niebuhr's location of this form of powerlessness in the arena of justice. Justice for Niebuhr was not merely a theoretical category but a concrete human responsibility. It was a matter of consistent and ongoing labour, inspired by faith and guided by the wisdom gained from contextual analysis. The Christian realism which mediated his understanding of praxis has particular meaning for a perspective which faces the Goliath of patriarchal culture and theology. It asks us to strive to achieve perfect justice (the Christian dimension) while fully recognizing the fact that justice will always be proximate (the dimension of realism).

In Niebuhr's doctrine of grace, the ultimate is put in place of the ultimate, which responds to the sins of both pride and willed sensuality. In the case of pride, Niebuhr consistently emphasized the contingency of historical existence to avoid the "pretension of finality" or absolutism, even the noble and idealistic absolutism of a historical utopia. Ongoing self-critique, he argued, is the only activity which prevents the expansion of a fluid

perspective into rigid ideology. This exhortation against dogmatism is as relevant to the feminist perspective as any other. At the same time that he stresses contingency, however, against willed sensuality he stresses the transcendent's ongoing relationship with history, which prevents knowledge of our inability to establish the unconditional in the conditional from leading to inaction, relativism or despair. Again, the feminist position, faced with at times overwhelming opposition, can draw from this hope.

Niebuhr's doctrine has extensive and unfortunate lapses as well, however. It is a fact that he did not formulate a theory of sin and grace for the powerless. This is a two-sided lapse: obviously the powerless are also sinful, and also require grace to respond to their sin. The powerless for Niebuhr were contextually significant as a *consequence* of the dominant group of his context. Their oppressed status was a result of the kind of sin he analyzed so extensively. He thus spoke to the powerless (women, in this case) only indirectly: in the arena of injustice, which is related to sin as its moral result, and in the arena of justice, which is the partial result of grace working in the sinful individual. He spoke to them, that is, only by assailing those who oppressed them.

Similarly, Niebuhr's warnings against despair were directed towards those who were already empowered and had deliberately capitulated, not towards those who had never been empowered or whose empowerment was impinged upon externally. In the consistent emphasis on realism in his theology, Niebuhr seems to have neglected a kind of empathy for the weak. Although his exhortations to the strong were almost invariably on *behalf* of the weak, his exhortations to the weak were invariably little more than the repeated urging to become strong. Perhaps if Niebuhr had lived into contemporary North America, where contextual leitmotifs resemble more malaise, structural apathy and hopelessness than pride and self-aggrandizement, he would have turned his attention more directly towards those whose only experience of power is as the butt of its abuse by others.

CONCLUSION

1) The Argument in General

In this paper I have examined the feminist critique[254] of Niebuhr's doctrine of sin and attempted to show that because it fails to take the contextuality of Niebuhr's theology into account, it rests on a mistaken assumption about the universality of his claim for pride. The critique had two related dimensions.

(i) Pride in Niebuhr's doctrine, it was argued, was erroneously advanced as the universal primary sin. I answered this with the argument that pride for Niebuhr, rather than being the primary sin for everyone, was the primary sin in the empowered of a specific context he engaged and addressed.

(ii) The reverse side of the critique that pride was emphasized was that sensuality or women's sin was not. I answered this by arguing that while it was true that Niebuhr did not address what the feminists termed *women's sin*, their assumption about *why* he did not was not. He didn't address it, that is, because for him it was evidence of injustice rather than sin.

I consider the argument and its related claims to be innovative in the following senses:

i) I make an explicit argument for the contextuality of Niebuhr's theology and link this to Christian realism, which I argue is Niebuhr's methodological approach.

ii) Through a specific contextual reading of his doctrine of sin, I demonstrate that the universal claim assumed and critiqued by the feminists is not a universal claim. This also renders their argument against his doctrine of grace superfluous.

iii) I reintroduce a gender-neutral analysis of Niebuhr's understanding of sin by evaluating it in terms of the empowered and powerless rather than the masculine and feminine. The points which proceed from this analysis, as discussed in chapter six, will, I hope, help to renew the doctrine's relevance to feminist theological discourse.

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[254] as expressed by Valerie Saiving, Judith Plaskow, Susan Nelson Dunfee and Daphne Hampson.

2) The Argument in Particular

In chapter one, I first briefly described Niebuhr's conception of human nature, as an understanding of the self as paradoxically comprising freedom and finitude is essential to comprehend both the feminist and the contextual reading of his doctrine of sin. I then described the feminist reading of the doctrine, on which the critique is based, which to my knowledge is almost entirely consistent with traditional or accepted interpretations.

In chapter two I rehearsed the critique made by the four feminist theologians, with the exception of their analysis of grace. All characteristics of the critique derived from an initial objection that Niebuhr's claim for the primacy of pride as sin was erroneously universal. The subsidiary objections were to the subordination of sensuality and its under-development and to Niebuhr's doctrine of grace as responding only to pride.

I then in chapter three elaborated my understanding of contextuality, which I based in part on the definition of D.J. Hall.[255] I argued that contextuality had three principal dimensions: discerning the context, engaging the context and being committed to it. To demonstrate the deliberate and consistent contextuality of Niebuhr's theology, it was first necessary to uncover his *methodology*. This, I argued in chapter four was embodied in what Niebuhr referred to as Christian realism. I initially demonstrated how Christian realism could be understood as Niebuhr's methodology. I then demonstrated how it exemplified the dimensions which I earlier argued were essential to a genuine contextual approach.

In my contextual interpretation of the doctrine in chapter five, I demonstrated (i) the complex preconditions of anxiety and their status as triggers of sin; (ii) the distinction made between the empowered and the powerless; (iii) the distinction made between willed and unwilled sensuality; (iv) why willed sensuality was plausibly subordinate to pride and (v) that Niebuhr's conception of unwilled sensuality was evidence of injustice rather than sin.

In my re-evaluation of the feminist critique in chapter six, I examined the feminist conception of women's sin and demonstrated its consistency with what I referred to as unwilled sensuality. I showed that women's sin as presented by the feminists did not fulfil

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[255] In *Thinking The Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), particularly the initial definition on pps. 75-92.

Niebuhr's criteria for sin in the first instance. I then discussed the perplexing insistence of the feminists on including such a condition under the rubric of sin. In section two I showed how the contextual reading responds to the subsidiary feminist critique of Niebuhr's doctrine of grace. Because unwilled sensuality was not sin for Niebuhr, he naturally did not directly address it in his doctrine of grace. This fact eliminates the argument that Niebuhr's doctrine reinforces women in their sin, because grace--as both breaking the self and as the ideal of self-sacrificial love--was not addressed towards women, insofar as they are powerless, as sinners. The doctrine quite appropriately, however, addresses both pride and willed sensuality by putting the ultimate in the place of the ultimate. It exhorts both the prideful self and the sensual self towards justice on behalf of the other, which demonstrates the indirect relation of justice to grace, and so the indirect relation of grace to the plight of the powerless--in this instance, women.

Finally, I tried to explore where Niebuhr's doctrine was and was not relevant to the feminist analysis and predicament as presented in these compelling papers. I argued that Niebuhr's doctrine had relevance primarily in (i) it's analysis of power, which is useful to the feminist perspective for both self-evaluation and the evaluation of its patriarchal adversary; (ii) his treatment of powerlessness in the realm of justice rather than sin, with its attendant emphasis on praxis and (iii) his response, in grace, towards the absolutism of one form of sin and the relativism of the other. I argued that his analysis was not relevant in the sense that he did not speak directly to the powerless in his doctrines of sin and grace. He spoke to them only indirectly, in the arenas of justice and injustice, as mediated by the sin and grace of the dominant group of his context, the powerful and power-abusing.

3) Closing Remarks

The feminist examination of Niebuhr's doctrine is significant in my view more for the pointed attention it draws to the absence of women's experience from much of accepted or influential Christian theology. The experience of reading theology, liturgy or doctrine which pleads for saving grace for all men is profoundly *alienating*. The experience of being denied certain kinds of participation in some churches because of sex is profoundly *enraging*. The experience of being taught theology almost exclusively by dated, middle-

aged, white men is profoundly *boring*. Any analysis which draws attention to theology's failure to address certain individuals or collectives is profoundly *meaningful*. Yet the specific critique of the doctrine of sin, because it does not recognize Niebuhr's contextuality, misinterprets it. The doctrine's very contextuality is what precluded it from having universal relevance: *it was not*, as I hope to have demonstrated, *intended to*. I believe, however, that the significance of Niebuhr's analysis for feminist theology far outweighs its insignificance, which is why I have engaged in this extended study.

Niebuhr's entire theological framework, more precisely, is an exhortation to contextuality. That is the extent of its universality. It seeks to prevent absolutism by demonstrating the contingency of historical existence and by stressing the importance of ongoing self-critique in any perspective. That is its *humility*. It seeks to prevent relativism by demonstrating the transcendent's ongoing irruption into history, which paradoxically bestows on history a meaning that transcends it. That is its *hope*. It warns us that power has no intrinsic gender, class or ethnicity and reminds us that the weak, when they join the empowered, are not immune to their sin. That is its *wisdom*. It consistently entreats--while recognizing the incompleteness of all human endeavour--the strong to strive for justice on behalf of the weak and the weak to strive for justice on behalf of themselves. That is its love.

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