

The Early Years

When Niebuhr was called upon to write a brief review of Dewey's occasional papers—*Characters and Events* (1929)—for Norman Thomas's *The World Tomorrow*, Dewey had just celebrated his seventieth birthday. Moreover, Dewey's book *The Quest for Certainty*, based on the prestigious Gifford Lectures he had delivered in the spring of 1929, had recently been published. Niebuhr, at this time, was a mere thirty-eight years of age, and having only recently arrived at Union Theological Seminary in New York, he was still three years away from the publication of *Moral Man* in which he both launched his own career and targeted Dewey for special criticism. In his 1929 review, however, Niebuhr lauded Dewey for being among that rare breed of philosophers willing to “descend from their ant-hill of scholastic hairsplitting to help the world of men regulate its common life and discipline its ambitions and ideals.”¹ Having just recently acknowledged in his book *Does Civilization Need Religion?* that whatever relevance religion might possess in the modern world depended partly on *pragmatic-consequential* criteria, Niebuhr praised Dewey as “a statesman for the reason that, though he has not had actual political responsibility, he has helped to form political thought and guide political conduct.”² He noted also that Dewey's recent seventieth birthday celebration “gave his friends an opportunity to rejoice in the triumphs of his spirit and purpose in philosophy, in education and in social reform.”³

No matter how sharp or severe their controversy became in later years, Niebuhr and Dewey made common cause in many social and political ventures from their socialist activism in the late 1920s to their participation in Sidney Hook's Congress of Cultural Freedom in the early 1950s. For all Niebuhr's subsequent criticism of Dewey, his willingness to situate Dewey among the “socially minded educators” was an expression of open admiration. In his remarks of 1929 there is not the slightest hint of vehement criticism of Dewey that lay immediately ahead.

Niebuhr simply saw *Characters and Events* as “an excellent survey” of Dewey’s thought. Indeed, at this juncture Niebuhr chose to include the American John Dewey, along with England’s Bertrand Russell, in a select party of two, whose “extraordinary contemporary influence” in the task of “molding the political and social thought of their people” this particular generation is quite fortunate to possess.⁴

Niebuhr was barely established at Union Seminary in 1929. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., noted that he “came to intellectual maturity under the influence of the Social Gospel and of pragmatism” and was thus “a child of the pragmatic revolt.”⁵ In this context it is somewhat curious that John Dewey’s name was never mentioned in his initial book, *Does Civilization Need Religion?* published in 1927. Although Niebuhr’s work shared much with Dewey’s social and ethical thinking, both his common ground with Dewey and signs of the sharp and pointed attack he would make on him in 1932 were nowhere apparent.

In part, this was simply the result of the broad territory occupied by all pragmatic liberals of that day. It is also true that Niebuhr appealed to philosophers like Alfred North Whitehead, whose rendition of the prevailing moral language of the day was more congruent with Niebuhr’s own religious vision. This religious vision embraced “a protected sphere of spirit” (to borrow a phrase from Niebuhr’s biographer Richard Fox). It also emphasized a sense of divine transcendence that traded off of nineteenth century idealism and thus stood in radical opposition to Dewey’s “naturalism.” Niebuhr did employ language similar to that of Dewey when he contended that “the religious interpretation of the world is essentially an insistence that the ideal is the real and that the real can be understood only in the light of the ideal.”⁶ But in so doing he shared Whitehead’s metaphysical viewpoint that the ideal is never simply rooted in the realm of the real; that is, in nature as the ground and limit of the possibility of the ideal. In 1927, at least, Niebuhr took his metaphysical comforts where he could find them in a world otherwise overwhelmed by what he saw as insidious forms of naturalism.

In 1927 Niebuhr believed religion to be the last “champion of personality in a seemingly impersonal world.” Religion, he insisted, was our one and only source for believing that we inhabit “a universe in which the human spirit is guaranteed security against the forces of nature which always seem to reduce it to a mere effervescence unable to outlast the collocation of forces which produced it.”⁷ Religion alone could provide “reasons” for avoiding moral enervation. He insisted that

A purely naturalistic ethics will not only be overcome by a sense of frustration and sink into despair, but it will lack the force to

restrain the self-will and self-interest of men and of nations. If life cannot be centered in something beyond nature, it will not be possible to lift men above the brute struggle for survival.⁸

This type of concern and the apologia based upon it were in essential agreement with Niebuhr's youthful Yale B.D. thesis of 1914 (entitled "The Validity and Certainty of Religious Knowledge"). In an altered and more sophisticated form this orientation remained with him throughout his theological career.

In this early period Niebuhr hoped that there could be developed, as Chapter 8 of his book puts it, "A Philosophy for an Ethical Religion." He thought that personality, with its accompanying traits of "freedom" and "moral responsibility," could only be safeguarded on a traditional religious basis. Yet what must be avoided at all costs, however consistent they might appear on purely logical grounds, were monistic and pantheistic metaphysics. In Niebuhr's account both monism and pantheism ended in a denial of the very freedom and responsibility essential to personal life. Niebuhr advocated *some* form of dualism as necessary for the plausibility of religious conviction. The tensions and contradictions in the actual world could be maintained and appreciated only on such a basis. What is significant is that even in these early years Niebuhr's rationale was a pragmatic one. He insisted that

What is needed is a philosophy and a religion which will do justice both to the purpose and to the frustration which purpose meets in the inertia of the concrete world, both to the ideal which fashions the real and to the real which defeats the ideal, both to the essential harmony and to the inevitable conflict in the cosmos and in the soul. In a sense there is not a single dualism in life; rather there are many of them. In his own life man may experience a conflict between his moral will and the anarchic desires with which nature has endowed him; or he may experience a conflict between his cherished values and the caprices of nature which know nothing of the economy of values in human life. In the cosmic order the conflict is between creativity and the resistance which frustrates creative purpose. Whether the dualism is defined as one of mind and matter, or thought and extension, or force and enertia, or God and the devil, it approximates the real facts of life. It may be impossible to do full justice to the two types of facts by any set of symbols or definitions; but life gives the lie to any attempt by which one is explained completely in terms of the other.⁹

Whereas the youthful Niebuhr felt that metaphysics could provide a way to lend rational support to religious claims, the focus was on what he deemed to be vitally at stake in such claims. Niebuhr was a consequentialist, even in his early choice and defense of metaphysical grounding. And although in 1927 he held that such grounding was important, he was prepared to grant that metaphysical grounding was far less important than ethical considerations. The oppositions that propelled Niebuhr to adopt a dualism were oppositions or tensions that he discerned *in experience*. He was prompted to embrace, with qualifications, a tenuous metaphysical position fraught with inconsistencies. At the same time, Niebuhr definitely subordinated the rational defense of religion to its compelling ethical urgency. In effect, Niebuhr's defense of dualism as a way of making sense out of the facts was based on pragmatic considerations. This pragmatic bent of mind also led him to doubt the possibility of any type of metaphysical grounding which would be rationally compelling. It should be noted that Niebuhr's sense of the "oppositions" or "tensions" eventually evolved into the "paradoxes" of a later day which required of him a more dialectical reading of experience without metaphysical defense. These tensions were increasingly argued to be features of experience most adequately expressed within the language of a religious tradition that modern thought prematurely dismissed.

In 1927 the ethical dimension of religion took precedence over all other considerations, for Niebuhr. By this he meant that religion must provide guidance for life and could justify itself to civilization as a viable enterprise only insofar as it succeeded in doing so. This was proximate to Dewey's understanding of philosophy. In this Niebuhr and Dewey shared a pragmatic-consequentialist view of the ideals of life. This emphasis, albeit in different form and with far more theological sophistication, remained central to Niebuhr's thought up until the period when he vehemently opposed the Barthian tendency to deny theological grounds for making discriminate moral judgments.

In the early period Niebuhr contended that it was far "better for religion to forego perfect metaphysical consistency," both for the sake of the facts, and also "for the sake of moral potency." Throughout *Does Civilization Need Religion?* Niebuhr's theme was that religion's failure in the modern age did not reside primarily at the level of metaphysical deficiency. The vast majority who were then irreligious were irreligious precisely "because religion has failed to make civilization ethical (rather) than because it has failed to maintain its intellectual respectability."¹⁰ Niebuhr's doubts about metaphysical grounding never tempted him to embrace Barthian positivism because a debilitating social irrelevance was the end product of the one as much as of the other. Of course, Niebuhr soon abandoned his hope that religion (much less anything else) could

"make civilization ethical." The task of making the "ethical and social resources available for the solution of the moral problems of modern civilization"¹¹ took priority then as always, with Niebuhr, although later on he would speak *only* of "proximate" solutions. Indeed, the task of finding a way to achieve social and political relevance set Niebuhr's lifelong agenda as a theological ethicist.

Richard Fox notes that Niebuhr's book, published in 1927, was "written in short spurts beginning in 1923" and was essentially a re-working of material which had appeared in the *Christian Century* "between 1923 and 1926." The book, according to Fox,

displayed no signs whatsoever of the major developments in his thinking since the summer of 1926: the critique of the AFL, of Ford, and of unethical power and privilege; the "despair" over the racial issue; the stress on workers' autonomy; the hesitant movement leftward to the ideological outskirts of socialism. It was a polishing of his earlier thoughts. It made no effort to incorporate his most recent insights.¹²

It is quite true that Niebuhr's efforts here constituted "a general moral stance" and "a proclamation of radical intent" rather than a progression beyond the "political content" of the previous year as Fox suggests.¹³ What Fox overlooks, however, is that the programmatic title *Does Civilization Need Religion?* sharply raised pragmatic considerations and contexts that increasingly governed Niebuhr's understanding of theological relevance. This book proved to be a convenient resting point, transitional in nature, reflecting the important shifts in Niebuhr's thinking between the time he was at Yale in 1914 and his iconoclastic bombshell of 1932 published under the title *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. The transition was from the youthful yearnings of a religious idealist to the maturing insights of a strident realist in which the force of transition was an increasingly pragmatic reading initially of politics and at a later time of theology.

Although Niebuhr's understanding of religion remained deeply connected to the ethical concerns common to both "religious" and "secular" liberalism, he moved rather decisively away from his earlier focus on personal morality to an ethic oriented toward social realities. He increasingly emphasized the fact that "life had moved on and the practical needs of modern society demand an ethic which is not individualistic and a religion which is not unqualifiedly optimistic."¹⁴ "Modern" liberal religious thought, in his estimation, was hardly modern enough—reflecting as it did the outdated individualism of the nineteenth century. It is surely true that Niebuhr reflected Schlesinger's "Social-Gospel—

Dewey amalgam" when he claimed that "it is the quest for what is not real but is always becoming real, for what is not true but is always becoming true, that makes man incurably religious."¹⁵ Niebuhr's language, as well as his moral conception, was virtually interchangeable with that of Dewey; the difference being simply that which divided the *religious* liberal from the liberalism of religiously inclined *humanistic-naturalist* of that day. But at this point Niebuhr was still a long way from any substantive turn toward those insights based on theological tradition with which he would effectively critique the entire liberal culture.

As comfortably liberal as Niebuhr's religious and political ideas remained in 1927, a few notes were sounded that would gain volume and achieve clarity in subsequent years. He began to identify a "moral simplicity in Protestantism which is closely related to its individualism,"¹⁶ and he anticipated the major theme of *Moral Man* in his recognition that "all human groups tend to be more predatory than the individuals which compose them."¹⁷ He recognized the sentimentality that had corrupted both moral and religious idealism and rendered such idealism largely oblivious to the harsh, even brutal, conflict of modern economic life. Nonetheless, in *Does Civilization Need Religion?* Niebuhr still glorified an abstract "social intelligence" that could produce "a finer fruit than the type of prudence which characterizes the international policy of modern states."¹⁸ He had yet to become highly suspicious of "social intelligence" or sufficiently appreciative of the serpentine wisdom required by effective statecraft.

To put the matter differently, in 1927 Niebuhr had yet to see the liberal concept of "social intelligence" as itself a piece of exaggerated idealism and excessive optimism. At this point he was reticent about "social intelligence" mostly because he believed that it was kin to the kind of "cynicism which discounts all moral and personal factors in social reconstruction and places its hope entirely in a new social strategy."¹⁹ This is crucial enough to give us pause, not only because it pointed to a region of serious conflict with Dewey, but also because it reflected extremely early sentiments that persisted in Niebuhr's thought.

In his earliest days Niebuhr defended "supernaturalism" against "naturalism" because he believed that supernaturalism alone could safeguard both the "person" and those values such as freedom and responsibility which were thought essential to personal life. Mere "social intelligence"—indeed the life of reason as such—was prone to a cynical despair productive of a debilitation of the will. In one form or another Niebuhr would sound this note over and over again throughout the years. However sophisticated his theological vision became, some measure of this viewpoint remained in his polemic against "naturalistic rationalism." Yet in fairness to Niebuhr, his criticisms of "social intelli-

gence," "reason," and "naturalism" became much more telling as they deepened and shifted to different grounds. It was not just a religious versus a nonreligious anthropology that would eventually govern the course of his criticism. The point where his attack upon Dewey's favorite shibboleths became interesting was where Niebuhr moved to an analysis of power, conflict, and a wholesale reassessment of liberal culture. This, too, of course, would propel him toward a deeper level of theological reflection. It reintroduced a richer and far more complex anthropology than was present in these early years. The direction of Niebuhr's maturing thought was only hinted at in 1927, when he suggested that intelligence alone could not achieve conciliation because "even at best human nature is so imperfect"²⁰ that much more than rational intelligence was required.

Niebuhr did introduce a definition of the religious life that stayed with him. He defended transcendence as a resource for "a sense of both humility and security before the holiness which is at once the source and the goal of his virtue" and which "saves him at the same time from premature complacency and ultimate despair."²¹ He argued that a religious idealism should issue in "humility which becomes the basis of self-respect," whereas an irreligious idealism tends toward pride. It was thus that social intelligence based on an irreligious idealism, although it "may be a partner in the process of conciliation" so essential to resolving group conflicts, "cannot bear the burden alone when a disposition to humility and a capacity for mercy is lacking."²² Such attributes, Niebuhr thought, arose solely out of a religious spirit, authentically understood. He declared that

The task of making complex group relations ethical belongs primarily to religion and education because statecraft cannot rise above the universal limitations of human imagination and intelligence. A robust ethical idealism, an extraordinary spiritual insight and a high degree of intelligence are equally necessary for such a social task. The difficulties of the problem are enhanced by the fact that the religious imagination and astute intelligence which are equally necessary for its solution are incompatible with each other. Religion is naturally jealous of any partner in a redemptive enterprise; and the same intelligence which is needed to guide moral purpose in a complex situation easily lames the moral will and dulls the spiritual insight.²³

John Dewey, of course, did not see things this way at all. Niebuhr was inclined to join the chorus of those theologians who claimed that

those who did not praise God invariably praise man. There are indeed many instances of this to draw upon, but as Niebuhr well knew, there were those among the pious who in praising God were praising themselves. Be that as it may, there were also those among the naturalists—Dewey being the prime example—who neither praised God nor saw reason to praise man too highly. Certainly, Dewey saw hope for humankind in its natural setting in spite of life's finality. He saw social intelligence neither in cynical terms nor as cut off from the values of personal and moral life. He developed his own theory of "religious" values within a particular version of naturalism decidedly antithetical to Niebuhr's own theism. Although he gave his undivided attention to religion only in his seventh decade, he did formulate his ideas on the subject in 1934 in his book *A Common Faith*.