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Reinhold Niebuhr's ethics of rhetoric

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REINHOLD NIEBUHR'S ETHICS OF RHETORIC

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Communication Studies

by

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the writings of the American public intellectual and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971). My project is a unique contribution to Niebuhrian studies in that I approach these works from the perspective of a rhetorical theorist. My intention is to parse from Niebuhr's editorial commentaries, his philosophical inquiries and lectures, his theological treatises, and his sermonic essays an specifically "Niebuhrian ethics of rhetoric." In order to accomplish this task I investigate the rhetorical situation Niebuhr was embedded in and to which he was responding to at the turn of the twentieth century. Part of the analysis of his rhetorical situation places him in conversation with other thinkers writing at the turn of the century, such as John Dewey and Walter Lippmann. From the rhetorical situation, the dissertation tackles Niebuhr's thought in three categories: Niebuhr's mythic—specifically Christian—approach to history, his dialectical approach to love, justice, grace and power, and finally, his rhetorical approach to the contemporary situations that call for judgment. I argue that Niebuhr's ethics of rhetoric are specifically Christian, in that they provide, on the one hand, the necessary mythic and dialectical tools one needs to make judgments in tragic realm of contingency, and on the other hand, the hope and faith that is required to move beyond the tragic realm of rhetoric without despair or cynicism. Niebuhr's characteristic "pragmatic Christian realism," I argue, is a much-needed approach to the ethics of rhetoric, one that is important for us to understand in a globalized "electric age," wherein the shared myths that found communities elude us, though we remain asked to make judgments that effect collectives we may never see face-to-face. Niebuhr's ethics of rhetoric is a guiding light for a rhetorical approach that moves

past the local community, fragmented since the industrial revolution and rationalized since the Enlightenment, to a broader sense of community that is neither Jewish nor Greek—neither, me might add, Muslim or Western. It is a rhetoric that moves us confidently, yet qualifiedly, into the future that is beyond tragedy.

Introduction

*This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine
Let it shine,
Let it shine,
Let it shine.*

*Hide it under a bushel? No!
I'm gonna let it shine
Hide it under a bushel? No!
I'm gonna let it shine
Hide it under a bushel? No!
I'm gonna let it shine
Let it shine,
Let it shine,
Let it shine.*

This well-known folk hymn was written around 1920 and first published in a collection in 1939. It was used in the 1950s and 60s as a Civil Rights anthem and since then, it has become a staple in Christian Sunday-Schools worldwide. Its Biblical roots come from Jesus's "Sermon on the Mount" recorded in Matthew 5:14-16: "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (KJV). The song is meant to encourage Christians not to keep the truth of the gospel to themselves, but instead, to let its truth be revealed to others in their actions and words.

Niebuhr took these metaphors seriously. As a Christian ethicist, his utmost concern as a scholar was the church's role in the creation and maintenance of social justice. When he surveyed the scene in 1933, the odds didn't look good for organized religion. Modernity's optimism was built on sinking sand; dependent on the expansive mood of the era of triumphant capitalism, it naturally gave way to confusion and despair when the material conditions of American life were seriously altered. What was worse, Protestant Christianity had linked itself to this culture, making sacrifices of its orthodox precepts to the spirit of reason and the demands of science. It had infused its ethic into Adam Smith's economics, evidence, according to Niebuhr by the church's inability to support the cause of labor in the battle with Henry Ford. "Confused and tormented by cataclysmic events in contemporary history, the 'modern mind' faces the disintegration of its civilization in alternate moods of fear and hope, of faith and despair" Niebuhr writes.¹ Surveying the post-War American landscape, Niebuhr drearily concludes: "Therefore the lights in its towers are extinguished at the very moment when light is needed to survey the havoc wrought in the city and the plan of rebuilding" (ibid.). The Christian faith that claims to have a light "the same yesterday, today, and forever" was, by Niebuhr's estimations, unable to offer any guidance, insight or clues to the meaning of life or the logic of contemporary history.

When Niebuhr argued that Christianity wasn't able to meet the needs required of it by the culture, it was not due to an inherent fault in Christianity's myths. Christianity failed to have a moral impact on the early 19th century because it missed the mark in its adjustments to the age of reason and science. These adjustments were necessary to make, but the church hadn't adjusted properly. Instead, modern Christianity had fallen into two

¹ (Niebuhr 1935, 3) (hereafter cited as *ICE*).

inept modes of thought: Orthodoxy and Liberalism. The Orthodox Church couldn't come to the aid of modern man for two reasons. First, its religious truths were still embedded in an outmoded science. Second, it expressed its morality in dogmatic and authoritarian codes (*ICE*, 2). In other words it used irrelevant and outdated precepts whose only authority came from their "sometimes quite fortuitous-inclusion in the sacred canon" (*ibid.*) Orthodox Christianity, for example, was more concerned with the violation of Sabbath prohibitions and puritanical prohibitions; it insisted on figurative sacrifices that had lost both their religious and moral meanings.

On the other hand the religion and ethics of the liberal church denominations were dominated by a desire for contemporary relevance and a need to prove to its generation that "it does not share the anachronistic ethics or believe the incredible myths of Orthodox religion" (*ibid.*) In other words, liberal Christianity had hid its light under the bushel of culture; instead of letting its light shine, it had tried for decades to prove that Christianity and science were completely compatible. It succeeded in this task, Niebuhr argued, by disavowing literal interpretations of the Bible, and by clothing what it did hold onto in new vocabularies that were acceptable to the modern mind. Having done so, the Liberal tradition, according to Niebuhr, was now in an even sorer state of affairs than Orthodoxy was. Orthodoxy's truths remained steadfast and it needed only to move past its moralism to become relevant—hence "Neo-Orthodoxy"—while Liberalism on the other hand, had picked a bad horse in the race—their destinies were, in a sense, intertwined with modern culture's. The modern mind it bedded down with, "which only yesterday seemed to be the final arbiter of truth, beauty, and goodness," was now in a sad state of confusion, "amidst the debris of the shattered temple of its dreams and hopes" (*ICE*, 5). What these two

failures really came down to, according to Niebuhr, was their respective misunderstandings of exactly how and why the church is *ever* relevant to social ethics.

Secular moral acts resolve conflicts by the counsels of a decent prudence, the most typical of which is articulated by Aristotle's "in nothing too much." Niebuhr contrasts this ethic to a religious one, noting that: "The distinctive contribution of religion to morality lies in its comprehension of the dimension of depth in life" (*ICE*, 15). In other words, a religious morality traces every force it encounters to some ultimate origin and then relates it to an ultimate end; it is not concerned merely with immediate values but with "the problem of good and evil;" it looks at immediate ends but it also includes "ultimate hopes. As Niebuhr poetically put it, an ethico-religious passion "is troubled by the primal 'whence' and the final 'wherefore'" (*ICE*, 3). The reason that a religious morality is concerned with these ultimate beginnings and ends is that it is the task of religion to give life's existence a unity and coherence of meaning. Since every human being tries, to some extent, to live a unified and coherent existence it follows that every person is more or less religious. Furthermore, the depth of one's coherent system of meaning is the deciding factor about what *kind* of religious person one is. For instance, in primitive religion the depth of this meaning only extends to the tribe, the village, those who live under *this* or *that* mountain. In an ultra-modern conception, what Niebuhr calls "superficial religion," modern man concerns himself only with what he can observe and account for with natural law.

On the other end of the religious spectrum, a "High religion" is one that seeks to unify and envelop the whole of reality and existence into its system of coherence. Whereas primitives are satisfied with a limited cosmos and ultra-moderns are able to banish uncertainty with science and reason, high religion leaves nothing unaccounted for in its

system of meaning—though this is not to say it reduces its myths to rational statements. Man’s desire for ultimate coherence eventually and inevitably drives high religion into depths as well as breadth. Depths are matters of *forms*. Breadths are matters of *realms*. The problem of evil for example, cannot be solved on the same plane where man and his nature remain in constant and stubborn conflict or irrational incompatibility. “Since all life is dynamic,” Niebuhr writes, “religious faith seeks for the final solution of the problem of evil be centering its gaze upon the beginning and the end of this dynamic process, upon God the creator and God the fulfillment of existence” (*ICE*, 4). To summarize: as man looks for more unity he goes deeper into existence by accounting for more forms (evil/good), and accounting for this depth drives him outside the realm of observation of cause and effect to a world he can only find through transcendent symbols, thereby adding breadth to the high religion. Thus, high religions are distinguished from other religions and from one another by the extent of the unity and coherence of life they seek to encompass *and* the sense of a transcendent source of meaning that, alone, gives confidence in the meaningfulness of life (*ibid.*).

This relationship between depth and breadth can be seen in Judaism’s transition from a tribal, primitive religion (The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) to a high, prophetic one. The Jews, as human beings, had a sense of the depth of existence, for they, like all humans, assumed life was meaningful. However, the breadth of their religion was limited to the tribes of Israel until they encountered new cultures and were forced to fit new cultures and civilizations into their system of meaning. The prophet Amos conceived of God as no longer tribally bound—“Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians unto me sayeth the Lord”—and thenceforth, breadth was added to Judaism’s worldview. When Jesus was

thought by many to fulfill the messianic dreams of Israel, Paul would remind them in a similar vein, “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free.” For Niebuhr, all theology began with Amos. This was due, undoubtedly, because he lived in a rapidly growing world with quickly expanding borders by means of travel and communication. Finding an ethical perspective that could address these concerns was imperative and for Niebuhr, the perspective would have to be a prophetic one, if its judgments and aspirations were to stand outside the relativities of such an unstable and rapidly changing society.

My task then is to analyze Niebuhr’s Christian ethics, which, as a prophetic one, is also bound to be a rhetorical one, for the prophet is, if he is nothing else, an orator. I argue that Niebuhr’s ethics reveal a Niebuhrian rhetorical form, one that condemns the pride of collectives, and yet, is also capable of showing people a better version of themselves. This means that it is capable of adjusting to the shifting tides of public sentiment. A group that is downtrodden and in despair, is lifted up out of the muck and mire of injustice, out of the overwhelming fate of tragedy, by the prophet’s songs, ideals, and aspirations. A group that holds its heads high, that sees a future filled with progress and marching toward an inevitable victory and subsequent utopia, is brought back to reality the prophet’s rhetoric of condemnation and judgment. In the prophet’s balance between judgment and mercy, between tragedy and beyond tragedy, a rhetoric is revealed that attempt to create ethical attitudes toward others and toward history.

This investigation of Niebuhr’s ethics of rhetoric is a timely one, for Niebuhr’s thoughts and forms continue to find their way into American public address. In a 2007 interview, David Brooks asked Obama if he had ever read anything by Niebuhr. Obama’s mood and tone, previously fatigued and measured, perked up a bit, according to Brooks: “I

love him. He is one of my favorite philosophers”(2007). When Brooks asked him what he took from Niebuhr, Obama responded “in a rush of words,” with a knowledgeable synthesis of Niebuhrian thought:

I take away the compelling idea that there’s serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief we can eliminate those things. But we shouldn’t use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction. I take away ... the sense we have to make these efforts knowing they are hard, and not swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism.

In response to this interview, Daniel Rice notes that it is a “rare event” in the United States when a president “refers to a thoughtful American theologian/social ethicist as a primary source of influence” (2009, xviii). But Rice may be getting ahead of himself; many presidents are apt to quote a philosopher or poet in order to get a point across, and many often make such citations out of context and without regard for their sources’ true intentions. In fact, Obama isn’t the first American politician to claim Niebuhr as his or her own. In addition to Jimmy Carter’s endorsement, both Newt Gingrich and Senator George Mitchell have also gone on record with Niebuhr quotes (Thompson 2009, 158). John McCain, in his campaign biography, dedicates an entire chapter to Niebuhr titled, “The Paradox of War.”² I won’t go into detail about why, for example, Carter clearly misinterpreted Niebuhr’s thoughts; what is more significant—and I’m in the majority opinion here—is that Obama clearly gets Niebuhr “right.”

In a major article for the *New York Times*, literary critic Michiko Kakutani surveyed the literary influences on the president, noting that Obama “has tended to look to non-ideological histories and philosophical works that address complex problems without easy solutions, like Reinhold Niebuhr’s writings, which emphasize the ambivalent nature of

² (McCain and Salter 2007)

human beings and the dangers of willful innocence and infallibility.”³ Richard Crouter notes that “much in Obama’s hopeful realism echoes Niebuhr’s blend of high principles and purposeful pragmatism” and that neither Obama nor Niebuhr line up “easily alongside the standard labels of left or right in politics or religion”(Crouter 2010, 11). By all standards, Obama correctly understands Niebuhr’s legacy, which as Eyal Naveh argues, “provides some hope that unlike Carter he will not abuse it” (2009, 285).

Whether or not Obama is faithful to Niebuhr’s philosophy in his presidential policies and politics, one thing is for sure; Obama’s *rhetoric* is substantially littered with “Niebuhrian” nods. The rhetorical influence of Niebuhr has been traced back as far as his address to the Sojourners/Call to Renewal conference in 2006. In that speech, Liam Julian notes that Obama, “after attacking the impulses of religious conservatives,” also said that “secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square” (2009). Niebuhr’s teachings, Julian notes—“his wariness of those who would act on God’s behalf and his opposition to those who would eliminate God from public discourse—echoed in Obama’s formulation.” Likewise, Obama’s 2009 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech was singled out for its Niebuhrian “tone.” According to Tom Heneghan, Religion Editor for *Reuters*, “The whole speech had a tone that American political commentators like to call Niebuhrian, either in its phrasing or its tough mix of political realism and moral thinking” (2009).

Obama’s 2011 address to the Univ. of Arizona after the attempted assassination of Gabby Gifford was perhaps his most Niebuhrian moment. Exercising one of the more important rhetorical duties of his office—epideictic memorial—Obama displayed a

³ See, (Rice 2009), for a concise summary of newspaper and magazine articles referenced here.

sober realism bookmarked with optimistic hope and pragmatic necessity—a formula that has become known as “Niebuhrian”:

Scripture tells us that there is evil in the world, and that terrible things happen for reasons that defy human understanding. In the words of Job, ‘when I looked for light, then came darkness.’ Bad things happen, and we must guard against simple explanations in the aftermath... Rather than pointing fingers or assigning blame, let us use this occasion to expand our moral imaginations, to listen to each other more carefully, to sharpen our instincts for empathy, and remind ourselves of all the ways our hopes and dreams are bound together.

Guarding against simple explanations is perhaps the most characteristic Niebuhrian rhetorical trope. It is one that some writers, especially those on the left, argue has been missing for sometime from American foreign policy.

For many, Obama’s use of Niebuhr’s philosophy in his policy and his appropriation of a Niebuhrian tone in his rhetoric are both welcome additions to the democratic discourse of the 21st century. In dealing with foreign affairs for example, Obama’s Niebuhrian rhetoric stands in stark contrast to that of the George W. Bush administration. After 9/11, the Bush administration announced its intention of bringing democracy and freedom to the Middle East. “Ideologues within the Bush administration persuaded themselves,” writes Andrew Bacevich, “that American power, adroitly employed, could transform that region, and they intended the invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s repressive, despotic regime to jumpstart that process” (2008). Bush’s “for-us or against-us” rhetorical stance drew a proverbial polarizing line in the Middle-Eastern sand. The results, Bacevich argues, speak for themselves (2008, xiv). The principles of “moderation, dialectics, and irony,” Eyal Naveh argues, seem to have disappeared from American politics and fallen back into an “uncritical patriotism since September 11, 2001”

(2009). Thus, he continues, “In the aftermath of patriotic excess and illusions of omnipotence, there is now, more than ever, a renewed need for Niebuhr’s legacy.”

This rebirth of Niebuhrian influence is not limited to the political discourse and policies of the US presidents and politicians; Niebuhr is also being reborn in the academy. This has come—as rebirths often do—only after a dormant period in which Niebuhr was declared insignificant—his voice considered an antique relic, incapable of assisting us in addressing uniquely modern problems. Niebuhr, whom Cornel West calls “the most influential cultural critic in mid-century America” and father of Christian pragmatism, was “toppled” long ago from academia’s highest pedestal, according to imminent theologian Martin Marty (West 1989; Marty 2009). Niebuhr was criticized for being “so mid-century” by today’s post-modern leaning writers and he was dismissed by religious leaders who, according to Martin Marty, wanted to be the first kid on their theological block to establish their currency by writing him off. But, “*Surprise,*” writes Marty, “Despite all the efforts to dismiss and replace him, he remains a force to be reckoned with.”

The list of recent works and quotations recommending a return to Niebuhr, observing the return, or seeking a cause for the turn, is extensive. In the November, 2007 *Atlantic*, Paul Elie argues that Niebuhr’s revival is exigent “because Niebuhr, better than any contemporary thinker, got to the roots of the conflict between American ideals and their unintended consequences like those the United States now faces in Iraq” (84). Daniel Rice notes that Niebuhr’s voice remains “much needed” because of its applicability to today’s political and social problems; the reason, he writes, is that “many of Reinhold Niebuhr’s insights and analysis continue to bear the mark of truth” (2009). John Patrick Diggins, preeminent pragmatist, philosopher and historian of ideas, dedicated his last days

to exploring the philosophy Niebuhr (2011). In *Why Niebuhr Now?* Diggins argues that Niebuhr demands that we be mindful of the ethical dilemmas that come from enormous power and responsibility; for Diggins, Niebuhr asks us to consider the question “How much evil might America do in attempting to do good?”

In *Why Niebuhr Matters*, Charles Lemert, Senior Fellow of the Center for Comparative Research at Yale University, eloquently hypothesizes that Niebuhr falls in a noble historical lineage of societal repairmen:

For almost every *What-now?* moment in history there has been a thinker or leader able to pick up the thread of what was unraveling to weave a new cloak out of the remnants. When Rome fell, there was Augustine. When Roman Christendom shook, there were Martin Luther and John Calvin. When classical metaphysics lost its grip, there were Kant, Marx, and Hegel. When the Qing dynasty collapsed there were Sun Yat-sen and Mao. On and on it goes—Philip, then Alexander; the house of David, then Isaiah and the prophets; Mary, then Elizabeth; Batista, then Castro; Leopold and the Belgians, then Lumumba and Mobuto. Not all who came after were good or helpful; but there were successors and for better or worse they gave what answers there were to *What-now?* (2011)

“Why Niebuhr?” Lemert asks; because he teaches us a “political realism that sacrifices neither ideals to mere pragmatism nor politics to bitterness and greed.”

It is significant that US politicians, political scientists, pundits and theologians are experiencing a Niebuhrian revival; but perhaps the breadth of the revival is more significant for rhetorical purposes than its depth. In other words, what is noteworthy about the Niebuhrian discourse is that it is uncharacteristically dialogic. In his “Preface to the Third Edition” of *The Promise of Reinhold Niebuhr*, released in 2011, Gabriel Fackre nicely summarizes the breadth of the Niebuhrian landscape:

Indeed, as in previous eras, folk at both ends of the spectrum pay tribute to him [i.e. Niebuhr]. See Neo-conservative David Brooks’s *New York Times* column of April 26, 2007. Important as well, is a 2006 essay by Peter Beinart. And then there is the December 1, 2009, *Christian Century* piece by Andrew Finstuen, “Where Is Reinhold Niebuhr When We Need Him?: This American Mess.” For a searching application of

Niebuhrian thought to recent American foreign policy and actions, see also Andrew Bacevich's *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*. Does this renewed attention put into question the comment of Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in his 2005 article, "Forgetting Reinhold Niebuhr"? The lamentation itself illustrates his continuing significance, since Schlesinger was one of numerous "Atheists for Niebuhr." (2011)

Niebuhr appeals to left, right and moderate political stances; he appeals to both atheists and Christians alike; he appeals to Saul Alinsky, the inspiration of the community organization movement in Chicago's South Side and mentor to Barack Obama; and yet, not only to Barack Obama but to Dick Armey as well—Obama's fiercest critic, who learned from the Niebuhrian Alinsky how to mount grassroots protests against Obama's policies—an irony that Niebuhr would have appreciated (Fackre 2011).

Niebuhr's broad appeal to diverse audiences is not a consequence of his death and the following bastardization of his thoughts—a trend that typically follows in situations where the author is no longer around to correct misinterpretations of her thought. On the contrary, Niebuhr's breadth and depth has never waivered, as noted by Sidney Hook, the acclaimed graduate advisee of Niebuhr's straw-man nemesis, John Dewey. "There must be something extremely paradoxical in the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr," wrote Hook, "to make so many who are so far apart in their own allegiances feel so akin to him" (Diggins 2011). Paradoxical indeed; in fact, Niebuhr's gift for paradoxical thinking will prove to be central to understanding the complex dialectics of Niebuhr's ethics of rhetoric.

Despite all of these reasons for an analysis of Niebuhr's rhetorical vision, I've yet to mention what is perhaps the most significant appropriation of Niebuhrian philosophy and rhetoric: his significant influence on the thought and rhetoric of Martin Luther King Jr. During his years in seminary at Boston University, King wrote many papers on Niebuhr. In

his earliest, an outline simply titled "Reinhold Niebuhr," he writes: "The merit of Niebuhr is that, seeing the problem of our age in its proper relations and dimensions, and laying firm hold on ultimate principles, he sets forth with rigour and profundity in analysis and criticism the fundamental weaknesses and inevitable sterility of the humanistic emphasis" (1992). King later developed these initial thoughts into a conference paper, which he presented to the *Dialectical Society* in 1954. In this later summation of Niebuhr's insights, King agrees with Niebuhr's rejection of the perfectibility of human nature. He writes:

We readily see that for Niebuhr, pride is the basic sin and all other sins such as injustice and sensuality result from this pride. It is one of Niebuhr's great merits to show how the sin of pride develops into the pride of power, pride of intellect, moral pride and spiritual pride. (ibid.)

King then has a very typical response to Niebuhr's thought, asking himself: "Within such a view is there no hope for man?" King's conclusion on the merits of Niebuhr foreshadows his later work in the Civil Rights Movement, where he would insist that the Negro must not wait for social justice, but demand it *now*. King writes:

Niebuhr's anthropology is the necessary corrective of a kind of liberalism that too easily capitulated to modern culture. Man who has come so far in wisdom and decency may be expected to go much further as his methods of attaining and applying knowledge are improved. Although such ethical religion is humane and its vision a lofty one, it has obvious shortcomings. This particular sort of optimism has been discredited by the brutal logic of events. Instead of assured progress in wisdom and decency, man faces the ever present possibility of swift relapse not merely to animalism but into such calculated cruelty as no other animal can practice. Niebuhr reminds us of this on every hand. (ibid.)

A decade later, King was still being reminded of it and using Niebuhr to remind others. Locked up in a Birmingham jail, King would pen an open letter calling Alabama's church leadership to concerted action on the side of the Negro. King writes:

My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. History is the long and tragic

story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups are more immoral than individuals. (1992, 87)

In one of the most canonical rhetorical artifacts in the history of rhetoric, King directly quotes a Niebuhrian theory of man that necessarily has a significant impact on a theory of persuasion as well; for if rhetoric must always keep an eye toward an audience's ethos, then any assumption about the quality of an audience's capacity for virtuous action demands a rhetorical response in kind. In other words, if one considers a collective group of individuals to be existentially incapable of moral action, then why and how does one appeal to such a collective rhetorically? Starting from the assumption that the shared interests of an audience result in a normative immorality means new demands on the rhetorical agent and the rhetorical situation. How does one appeal to an audience ethically when that audience is incapable of ethical action? Or does one appeal to them at all? Instead, does one seek out those moderate audiences that are not yet solidified into one collective or another? And how does this analysis help us understand a rhetorical audience as more than just bodies sharing a collective space, but as common interests that transcend spatially?

These questions, and others like them, are an important reason for undertaking a rhetorical analysis of Niebuhr's work. It is remarkable that the most notable public agents Niebuhr impacted are both strong rhetoricians—notable for their eloquence, charisma, and ability to move large numbers of people into coordinated political action for common goals. Both of these social leaders *are* Reinhold Niebuhr's rhetorical legacy. They applied his theology and philosophy to their rhetorical style and substance, and they were successful by every rhetorical standard one can use to measure them. Thus far, we've addressed

Niebuhr's influence in presidential politics, public address and in the social ethics that guided the Civil Rights Movement; we've shown that this influence has been unanimously agreed upon in the literature; we've seen that this reemergence is not constrained to politics and rhetoric, but is also reappearing in political science and theological discussions; and finally, we've seen that many agree the Niebuhrian revival is a timely, much needed one.

However, before linking these observations more directly to their correlative need for a rhetorical-minded analysis of Niebuhrian thought—which I hope is now intuitive—one final aspect of Niebuhr's rhetorical legacy demands attention, which is that Niebuhr himself was an acclaimed orator. Niebuhr's rise to prominence in American discourse was due in no small part to his massive rhetorical appeal to various audiences. According to biographer Richard Fox, Niebuhr was one who instantly drew circles around him wherever he went (1985, 111). Fox writes:

[Union's students] dogged his steps as he careened through the hallways, they sat wide-eyed in the Common Room after lunch and dinner while he issued rapid-fire commentary on world events, they struggled to record even a small portion of his lectures as his words raced ahead to keep up with his mind. They flocked to chapel to hear him roar and watch him gesticulate: his words rolled down like waters, his ideas like a never-ending stream. Thoughts piled up on other thoughts with such speed that sentences were often abandoned halfway through, overwhelmed by more potent images that followed... it was the free flow of an inspired mind, summoning a favorite Old Testament verse in an affectionate whisper, playing excitedly with some key irony of human living or paradox of Christian belief, clamoring with fists clenched for an end to Christian complacency and the dawn of a militant church fighting eyeball to eyeball with the powers and principalities.

Niebuhr's style was "brash, outspoken," and "vehement" (Fox 1985). It was, to use James Darsey's words, the prophetic style of "fire and strength" (1997). As Lemert notes, Niebuhr was always first and foremost a preacher, and his philosophical insights would never have reached the public stage without his background in public address (2011, 29). The

following is a typical report of Niebuhr's ability to wake-up an audience. It paints a beautiful picture that every rhetorician will appreciate, and so I quote it at length:

The final speaker was introduced. No one in the crowded dining room seemed to pay much attention. It was Saturday night in the Spring of 1949, and several hundred politically minded people had been in that Chicago hotel for thirty-six hours trying to hammer out recommendations for improving the nation's foreign and domestic policy. By ten o'clock the air was stale and the people were stale. The stimulating effect of the cocktail hour had worn away, leaving a glaze in the eye, a weight on the limbs, and irresistible desire to yawn. A young couple from New York noted with relief that the final speaker carried no prepared text.

The speaker straightened his tie, ran a big-knuckled hand over his shiny pate, pulled his long nose further downward, and spoke rapidly in a deep voice. By the end of one sentence, he had every person's full attention; by the end of one hour, he had several hundred people on their feet, clapping, stamping, shouting their approval.

Few speeches can have rivaled this one for profundity, for range, for electromagnetism. Listeners sat bolt upright, their fists clenched, as the speaker bombarded them with startling new ideas, startling interpretations of old ideas, dramatic challenges to their long-accepted presuppositions, and sudden explosive humor. (Lemert 2011, 29-30)

Niebuhr's ability to speak powerfully to crowds of all kinds was uncanny. In this respect then, Niebuhr's rhetoric was much like his philosophical and political thought: his appeals were as broad as they were deep. When Niebuhr spoke, it mattered little if his audience was farmers in rural Missouri churches, workers and executives in Detroit, or theologians at Union or in Europe (Lemert 2011, 30). Like every true prophet, Niebuhr spoke to a particular audience but he also transcended that audience as he addressed the universal problems of human existence. In other words, Niebuhr had the ability to speak both "timeless words" and "special words" to every audience. This is what King meant when he said that Niebuhr's merit was that he saw the "problem of our age in its proper relations and dimensions, and laying firm hold on ultimate principles," rigorously and profoundly

analyzes and criticizes “the fundamental weaknesses and inevitable sterility” of the human-being (1952).

Seeing the problems of our age, was always a pragmatist who insisted that working toward a more just and loving society was the church’s true mission; grabbing hold of ultimate principles and using them to condemn and aspire nations, Niebuhr was always a prophet; surveying the scene analytically and dialectically, Niebuhr was always a thoroughgoing realist. In this threefold way, Niebuhr’s “Pragmatic Christian Realism,” shows us one way to bridge the rhetorical divide between circumstantial and principled appeals; a divide left open by Richard Weaver’s *Ethics of Rhetoric* (1953). Niebuhr’s ability to make judgments based on timeless ideals that are, as he called them “impossible possibilities,” in a postmodern world that rejects certainty and absolutism, is his lasting legacy; and it corrects the lamentation of James Darsey (1997) and others that such an accomplishment isn’t possible in postmodernity. The key to Niebuhr’s method, I will show, depends on more than merely understanding the paradoxical relationship between timeless words and special words, ideals and actuals, transcendence and immanence. In addition to this understanding, Niebuhr demands what he sees as a Christian *attitude* that is noted for its love, forgiveness and ironic depiction of the dramas of human history.

The ability to observe the irony in a situation depends on the observer’s ability to balance his analysis of vanity and virtue. The observer must not be so hostile to the victim of irony as to deny the element of virtue in the historical situation; but equally, he must not be so sympathetic as to discount his weakness, vanity and pretensions in another element of the situation.⁴ Participants from *within* the situation can rarely perform the latter, and

⁴ (Niebuhr 2008) (hereafter cited as *IAH*).

thus the knowledge of irony is usually reserved for *observers* and not participants. For Niebuhr, the observer who remains outside the situation and maintains balance in his judgments and understandings between vice and virtue, is a competent critical interpreter of historical situations. I argue that this role is an idealistic one in that it provides timeless judgments from outside or above the given community that negate ideological assumptions. It is prophetic in that it applies these timeless ideals to the contingent historical situations of its community. Finally, Niebuhr synthesizes these two roles dialectically into a pragmatic application of both principle and circumstance, ideal and real, transcendent and immanent, in order to create a rhetorical *attitude* that is humble, ironic, repentant and hopefully, more ethical.

Niebuhr's impact on the religious, political, and intellectual life of the twentieth century, and the impression he made on contemporaries, is well documented (Brown 1992, 1). Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., America's most imminent historian and a man who spent years in the White House, said of Niebuhr, "He was the greatest man I knew;" he had "an understanding of human nature and human society that no one has equaled in our century" (ibid). John Gunther once wrote, after interviewing Niebuhr, "to ask Dr. Niebuhr a question is like hurling a paper dart into an electric fan" (ibid). He continued: "The ideas rushing out of his mind, his answers to questions, are never mere verbal confetti but are like splinters off craggy granite" (ibid). After hearing Niebuhr speak at a conference, Walter Lippmann was heard to say, "We shall not see his like again." He was, according to Nathan Scott, Jr. "the most creative theologian in the history of American thought" (ibid).

In addition to understanding Niebuhr's historical context within a rapidly changing and radically new rhetorical situation, we must come to terms with the role the Christian

myth played in Niebuhr's thought. We will find that Kenneth Burke's summary of Augustine is an apt one for Niebuhr, himself influenced more by Augustine than perhaps any other thinker:

The great store of Biblical texts, learned verbatim and spouted forth at appropriate moments, were like attitudinally slanted names for situations. Each time a situation arose, it presented itself to him in terms of some Scriptural formula that in effect "adopted a policy" with regard to it. Thus by confronting a current situation in terms of a Biblical response, such citations had the effect of making the situation itself essentially Biblical, to be classed with situations not literally present at all. Thus there is a sense in which his Biblical terminology of motives enabled him to "transcend" the sheerly empirical events of his times." (Burke 1970, 58)

From the rhetorical situation and the Christian myth, we will then observe the significant role dialectical inquiries played in Niebuhr's prophetic voice. Once we understand this characteristically Niebuhrian-interplay between what he calls the ideal and the real aspects of existence, we will then investigate the words of criticism and aspiration, which the "poet-prophet" speaks to nations, empires, and their public. Lastly, we will look to Niebuhr's own analysis of notable rhetors for a definition of Niebuhrian rhetoric that comes straight from the ethicist himself.

Chapter 1

The Onslaught of Modernity

Grasping the essence of a rhetorical utterance, whether it is a public speech, a poem, a theological *magnum opus*, or a philosophical treatise, requires us to locate our study in the situation that calls it forth. Philosophy, like rhetoric, is pragmatic: “it comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world; it performs some task” (Bitzer 1968). This is what Bertrand Russell meant when he wrote of the “imaginative background” of human thought and as Roger Shinn notes, this imaginative background is closer to center-stage in Niebuhr’s philosophical writings than it is for most other philosophers (Shinn 2009b, 3). Thus, discovering Niebuhr’s ethics of rhetoric requires that we first understand his rhetorical situation. More than just situating Niebuhr in a historical setting, this means that we look closely at the natural context of persons, events, relations, and exigencies which called forth Niebuhr’s writings (Bitzer 1968). For Niebuhr, that means we recall the intellectual, material and social developments that coincided with America’s rapid shifts from an agrarian to an industrial economy, from pious and religious farm communities to secular and urban suburbs, from the wisdom of the common sense man on the street to the management of social technocrats, and from the cult of heroic individual personality to what Kenneth Burke calls, “the bureaucratization of the imaginative” aspects of creative existence (Burke 1968). This task is especially important for looking at someone like Niebuhr who truly embodied the experiential and experimental principles of pragmatism.

Niebuhr’s thoughts were like infrastructural developments; they appeared in a world of ideas already established and they proceeded to improve the landscape by bulldozing and excavating earlier thoughts in order to build something new, better, or

more appropriate to a contingency. For this reason Shinn argues that understanding Niebuhr requires that we locate his opinions in their historical contexts and relate them to his personal experiences, “to the various successive struggles of his life, to politics, to economics, to world history” (Shinn 2009a, 83). “If we think we discover his judgment and freeze it in time” Shinn writes, “we may blind ourselves to its dialectical counterparts, which may prevail simultaneously or later” (83). In fact, Niebuhr was so engaged in the salient issues of the middle of the twentieth century that any account of his thought necessarily provides a panoramic view of the events and milieus of his age as well (Brown 1992, 1). Niebuhr’s life and thought spanned decades that witnessed momentous and traumatic events in American life—the Great Depression, the Second World War and the nuclear threat and challenge of communism it brought with it, and finally the Civil Rights Movement and war in Vietnam. Niebuhr’s specific responses to these crises were always unique, prophetic and experimental; however, his ability to see what others didn’t have eyes to see—whether because they were closing their eyes in apathy or were simply misinformed by propaganda—was a rhetorical skill developed during his earliest work as a pastor in Detroit.

Ford’s Detroit and Wilson’s War (1915-1919)

After Niebuhr’s undergraduate studies at Eden Theological Seminary he took his studies to Yale where, after finishing his M.Div., he was invited to pursue his doctorate. But Niebuhr wasn’t interested in a monkish existence as an academic; as he later put it, “epistemology bored me... and frankly, the other side of me came out: I desired relevance rather than scholarship” (Brown 1992, 20). He was twenty-three when he arrived at the Bethel Evangelical Church of Detroit, MI in 1915. There, during his immersion into the

cultural malignancies of industrialism—his sense made more acute by his residence in a “Henry Ford town”—Niebuhr became deeply concerned about the problems of social justice in a bourgeois society and he noticed immediately that the Ritschlian social gospel he espoused at Yale was an inadequate solution to the problems of his blue-collar parishioners (Niebuhr 1927, 6). As he would later recall, “I was up against an industrial city, and I saw that human nature was quite different than I had learned at Yale Divinity School” (Brown 1992, 20). Yale Divinity School was a booming social gospel program that taught that individual morality, specifically the love ethic of Jesus Christ, was a practical and just solution for the public and political square as well. But Niebuhr soon discovered that Henry Ford couldn’t be mercifully “loved” into giving the autoworker a fair wage. Love and mercy or the Sermon on the Mount, Niebuhr found, didn’t dominate the realm of politics; it was a realm dominated by power and controlled by the will-to-power.

Thus, in 1920 Niebuhr called attention to the growing popularity of “the social gospel” in Detroit and its inadequacies in dealing with the injustices of industrialization by noting that even the social gospel, as it was being preached, was tainted by the self-interests of the church. “To those who believe in the kingdom mission of the church this new social vision of religion is very gratifying” he writes, “but upon closer study it frequently reveals disappointing characteristics” (1920, 588). The greatest weakness of the social gospel is that it was “dictated by the church’s instincts for self-preservation” (ibid.).

Niebuhr writes:

The church knows what is occupying the mind of the world and it is anxious to satisfy that interest. If it expresses liberal or radical sentiments on current industrial or social problems it frequently betrays a greater desire to “hold the workingman for the church” than to establish justice for him. In short, the church seems tempted for the sake of its own prestige to claim rather than actually to exert a telling influence in the social issues of the hour. While it is anxious to be regarded as the

agent, not to say *the* agent of world salvation it has not yet applied itself very diligently or whole-heartedly to the task, and its interest in the issues of the day is still quite dilettantish. (588)

Already, Niebuhr was putting into practice what he learned while studying the eighth century prophets in his favorite class at Yale; that the beginning of criticism is self-criticism. (“All theology begins with Amos,” he would later remark). Niebuhr criticized the church long before he criticized labor, Ford or American culture. The church was committing a form of original sin, a sin that provided the backdrop for everything Niebuhr wrote over the next fifty years. The church was no different from mankind in that it was acting uncritically and out of its own interests. In other words, it was guilty of mankind’s perennial sins: pride and egotism.

During his early work as a pastor in Detroit, Niebuhr struggled for answers to the problems he bumped up against. He wasn’t sure exactly how to get the social justice he strongly desired for autoworkers partly because he wasn’t quite sure who was at fault. Was it Ford’s fault? If so, how could Niebuhr get him to change his labor practices? Was it the workers’ faults for fighting for individual rights instead of coming together to bargain for rights collectively? If so, how could Niebuhr persuade him to organize? Finally, what was the role of the Church and the pastor in all this? Was it to preach love and repentance to Ford and the world, to offer a sanctuary where workers could retreat from the toils of labor and feel some sense of the dignity of personality, or was the church’s role to offer a prophetic judgment upon all those who were guilty of perpetrating injustice—at risk of losing the ears of the city altogether. What he did know, he would later remark, was that working as a pastor in Detroit showed him “that the simple idealism” of the prevailing liberal theology “was as irrelevant to the crises of personal life as it was to the complex

issues of an industrial city” (Brown 1992, 20). Thus, Niebuhr’s immediate experiences in Detroit led him to cynicism and disillusionment, an experience he would always remind others of when they clung to a too optimistic a view of human nature, in the face of all the facts of experience.

Later, Niebuhr published excerpts from his journal during his Detroit years under the apt title *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*. This journal, as well his columns published in newspapers and magazines during the same period, provide an intimate look at how Niebuhr rigorously analyzed and profoundly understood the many-sided problems of industrial civilization. Niebuhr’s questions, from 1915 to 1971, were always: How do we get people to empathize with the suffering of people whom they are not intimately connected to? How do we garner political support for the cause of justice from those who cannot see the wounds, hear the cries, or feel the anguish of the downtrodden and heavy labored?

This question begs for a rhetorical answer and I would argue that Niebuhr’s journal documents his struggle and eventual success in answering it; the journal shows the birth of an articulated rhetorical philosophy for a prophetic pragmatism. For example, this 1924 journal entry is completely typical for the published collection:

I wonder whether there is any way of being potent oratorically without oversimplifying the truth. Or must power always be bought at the expense of truth? Perhaps some simplification of life is justified. Every artist does, after all, obscure some details in order to present others in bold relief. (45)

As can be seen here, Niebuhr understood oratory as an ethical tool for moving collective action that nevertheless was bound by certain ethical requirements, one of which was to do justice to the facts while also interpreting those facts and presenting them artistically. As a pastor, Niebuhr’s most institutionalized, protected and powerful weapon was his rhetorical

voice. Every Sunday Niebuhr was given the opportunity to address a diverse audience of Detroit's citizens and for him this came with weighty responsibility and power. Niebuhr sought to use this responsibility and power for the *Good* and this dissertation is a project in elaborating and developing this ethics of rhetoric more explicitly.

One of the largest factors that shaped Niebuhr's development of this ethics of rhetoric was his personal experience. His was always a pragmatic philosophy and thus, it begins with Niebuhr's lived experiences in Detroit from 1915-1927. During his time in Detroit, Niebuhr bumped into all of the events and experiences that would plague the modern era's common experiences and its literary and philosophical struggles with them. These experiences may be succinctly broken down into material and spiritual categories, i.e. those problems that effected health, war, labor hours, wages, and consumer goods; and those that affected the individual self and the meaning and mysteries of human existence. However, for Niebuhr, these categories were not distinct and separate concerns. As a pragmatist and existentialist, Niebuhr knew that the facts of experience testified to the bound nature of their relationship to one another. Niebuhr testified to Martin Luther King's truth; that preventing a Negro from riding public transportation through Alabama did more than keep him from getting to his destination, it had a damaging effect on his dignity as well.

During his first few years in Detroit, two new situations come to the forefront of his journal entries and seem to shape his thoughts on the human scene at that time. The first was his new experiences as a pastor. As a young Midwestern country pastor fresh out of divinity school, Niebuhr was all of a sudden charged with addressing people didactically who were twice his age and perhaps ten times his cumulated experiences and practical wisdom. In fact, *Leaves* Niebuhr confesses, was published in order to help pastors

understand and prepare from the experiences of a young pastor. For this reason, Niebuhr was always critical of his own and other pastors' methods. Niebuhr explains the reason for this in the preface, where he writes: "I make no apology for being critical of what I love. No one wants a love based on illusions, and there is no reason why we should not love a profession and yet be critical of it" (8). For Niebuhr, criticism was part of establishing true *ethos* as a thinker. It is a time-honored truth we often forget as rhetoricians, yet one we learn as children in the playground, discovering for the first time that to our astonishment, the reason Johnny teases Sally is that he actually likes her. An additional aspect of this truism is that if there is no truth in the criticism, it will likewise be ignored. Dignifying the criticism with a response is a way of legitimizing it and perhaps there is no greater love than the love of legitimation.

When Niebuhr wrote his first journal entry in *Leaves* he was 1915 and he was 23 years old. He begins it with this reflection: "There is something ludicrous about a callow young fool like myself standing up to preach a sermon to these good folks. I talk wisely about life and know little about life's problems. I tell them of the need of sacrifice, although most of them could tell me something about what that really means" (9). Niebuhr lacked what he called the "seasoned wisdom" of old-age, revealed to him after preaching a sermon on "The Involuntary Cross" when an older lady, bolder than most, asked him if he had borne many crosses in his life. But in the next paragraph Niebuhr addresses another new experience, an important one because it shows how even at his earliest age and without making an explicit connection to these two reflections, he solves problems rhetorically. He writes:

I found it hard the first few months to wear a pulpit gown. Now I am getting accustomed to it. At first I felt too much like a priest in it, and I abhor priestliness. I

have become reconciled to it partly as a simple matter of habit, but I imagine that I am also beginning to like the gown as a kind of symbol of authority. It gives me the feeling that I am speaking not altogether in my own name and out of my own experience but by the authority of the experience of many Christian centuries. (9-10)

Even if visual rhetorics had been theorized by this time (they hadn't) Niebuhr wouldn't have been likely to have encountered them at this point in his life. It wasn't theory, but Niebuhr's vocation that grounded his experiences with rhetoric as a powerful tool for solving man's problems. Here, Niebuhr lacked the experience and age to establish *ethos* with his audience; his solution was to borrow the ethos of Christianity by way of wearing a robe, not necessarily because it *actually* gave him ethos with the audience, but because it made *him* feel like he was speaking for a timeless truth that transcended his limited experiences. The visual and symbolic rhetoric in this case was a tool for the rhetor and not necessarily the audience.

The most important observation, I want to reiterate, is that we see in this reflection what will be an ongoing theme in Niebuhr's journals and that is, when Niebuhr bumps into a problem, rhetoric is always some aspect of its solution. For instance, after preaching only twelve sermons, Niebuhr already found himself regurgitating old messages. Frustrated, his reflection on the topic can only be understood as one regarding *kairos*. He writes:

If I really had great convictions I suppose they would struggle for birth each week. As the matter stands, I struggle to find an idea worth presenting and I almost dread the approach of a new Sabbath. I don't know whether I can ever accustom myself to the task of bringing light and inspiration in regular weekly installments. (12)

Note how Niebuhr moves from his particular and special situation to exploring it in general and universal concepts—even in terms that call to mind Plato's *Phaedrus*:

How in the world can you reconcile the inevitability of Sunday and its task with the moods and caprices of the soul? The prophet speaks only when he is inspired. The parish preacher must speak whether he is inspired or not. I wonder whether it is

possible to live on a high enough plane to do that without sinning against the Holy Spirit. (12)

Niebuhr's struggle presents us with an issue of rhetoric's timeliness. Some of you reading this will no doubt be teachers and professors and as such, you will recognize this struggle as well. How do we teach when we simply don't *feel* like it? But another and more-pressing issue presents itself to the pastor as well. His congregation doesn't radically change every semester. After thirteen weeks of teaching, Niebuhr has to talk fresh and anew to the same students, as he will after twenty, sixty, even a hundred weeks of sermons.

Of course, this is not to say that congregations don't grow and shrink or alter the make-up of their membership. In fact, Niebuhr's pastoral and rhetorical response must have proved *kairotic* and *preppon*: during his time in Detroit the membership of his church grew from sixty to six-hundred⁵. Niebuhr lamented in 1916 that he had no ideas and was a mere glib talker; he hoped that eventually he would "find something worth saying." But Niebuhr's search for *kairos* would conclude quicker than he probably expected as Woodrow Wilson would end America's isolationist foreign policy and set out to "make the world safe for democracy." In 1917, Niebuhr penned his second article for *The Atlantic* on the paradox of Patriotism; however, his more somber and revealing thoughts on the situation are recorded in *Leaves*.

Niebuhr was always searching for new experiences that would ground his thoughts in the facts in the ground. I'm reminded of a dialogue I once had with a professor on the difference between philosophers with children and those without, an important one being that the former usually understand psychological development for empirically and the

⁵ Detroit was a growing city and this is part of the reason for Bethel's growth. While the city grew at a staggering 25%, Bethel's growth far surpassed it during Niebuhr's tenure at around 600%.

latter tend to talk more in abstracts and universals. Niebuhr might suggest a similar difference between philosophers who had and had not been to a war camp or visited Germany after the war, as he did in 1923 (afterward, he immediately returned to the US after polemicized the ethical and moral mockery that was the Treaty of Versailles). And again, Niebuhr did suggest that those who still believed in the purity of reason and the goodwill of rational man, take a walk through the Ford factories or counsel autoworkers' families after they had been laid off. In a journal entry from 1927 he observes that if the romanticists and sentimentalists could just sit through a meeting where the real social issues of the city were discussed, they would instantly be cured of their optimism (115).

So it was for Niebuhr in 1918--his first entry in *Leaves* from that year is subtitled "After a Trip Through the War Training Camps"—that upon returning from such a visit he once again reflected on the problems of the situation and adjusted his attitude accordingly (19-20). He begins with a confession: "I hardly know how to bring order out of confusion in my mind in regard to this war"; which reveals that even in his meta-discourse—his thoughts about his thoughts—he speaks in thoroughly Jamesian language about the stream-of-consciousness and problem solving (*ibid*)⁶. Niebuhr analyzes his journey through the camp with Jamesian reasoning, pulling our objects, separating them, and piecing them back together harmoniously. First Niebuhr notes that *if* Wilson's aims are realized the war may serve a good purpose but that these aims may not justify the means

⁶ I can't help but note that throughout my studies of Niebuhr, wherever I found James, I also found the roots of James' pragmatism, i.e. C.S. Peirce. Whereas James sometimes departs from Peirce, Niebuhr rarely uses *that* James in his appropriation or implicit use of pragmatic methods. This is notable because one would think that James' *Varieties* would be the most important aspect of James' thought for Niebuhr. It was important—Niebuhr wrote his M.Div. thesis on the subject—but it wasn't James' topic that Niebuhr found useful; it was James' method, which he did, in fact, appropriate from Peirce, and James' understanding of the quest for ethical being that made Niebuhr a Jamesian.

by which America is using to achieve them. Niebuhr writes, "Out at Funston I watched a bayonet practice. It was enough to make me feel like a hypocrite for being in this thing, even in a rather indirect way. Yet I cannot bring myself to associate with the pacifists. Perhaps if I were not of German blood I could" (19). It is all there, in this quote. Niebuhr's confused thoughts, not separated into their categories yet, objects, events, ethical questions all jumping out at him simultaneously. The question about what to do is always intertwined for Niebuhr with what James calls an ethical moment. "What he shall *become* is fixed by the conduct of this moment," James writes (1961, 41). He continues, "The problem with the man is less what act he shall now resolve to do than what being he shall now choose to become" (ibid).

This ethical tension is not just an abstract universal thought experiment for Niebuhr; it is genuinely felt as a part of his project of becoming, which always involves rhetoric in some aspect. This is evidenced by his reflection on his experiences with the military chaplains. "What makes me angry is the way I kowtow to the chaplains as I visit the various camps" he writes (19). Niebuhr knew that they were ministers of the gospel just as he was and additionally, that they were both serving as priests of the God of love and the great God of Mars, at this moment. It wasn't that they were of a higher rank or that they were particularly smart or astute preachers or theologians. The only difference Niebuhr could find was a symbolic one; that unlike himself, they bore the "adequate symbols of this double-devotion" to both God and country. These chaplains wore the cross on their shoulder as well as a uniform that symbolized their devotion to the "god of battles." Niebuhr makes another confession: "It is the uniform and not the cross which impresses me and others. I am impressed even when I know that I ought not be" (20). Thus, for

Niebuhr, a base rhetorical appeal—or perhaps we should say “less noble”—are those appeals that stir the desires, emotions, and feelings of loyalty and appreciation toward something higher than the god of love. This, as we shall see later, is not actually a rhetorical appeal to another competing god, i.e. the god of battles; it is actually an appeal to the will-to-power of the self in that it is persuasive because it triggers in the audience an unqualified feeling of pride, egotism, nationalism, and/or patriotism.

Since Niebuhr could make no clearly logical decision about the means and ends of the war policy at this time, he tried to figure out why those who could were able to do so. What he discovered was a practical solution to a ethical problem that he would find himself in battle with for the rest of his career, and the problem was a rhetorical one. “I can see one element in this strange fascination of war which men have not adequately noted,” he writes: “It reduces life to simple terms” (21). This simplicity was a welcome retreat from the complex modern society man newly inhabited. “Every moral venture, every social situation and every practical problem involves a whole series of conflicting loyalties,” note Niebuhr, “and a man may never be quite sure that he is right in giving himself to one as against the other.” It was out of this “mesh of conflicting claims, interests, loyalties, ideals, values and communities” that modern man was being rescued by the “psychology of war” which elevated the State, at least for the moment, above all other conflicting demands for allegiance (21). This simplicity, combined with man’s love of authority, purchased man’s temporary happiness that, since it does violence to life, could not be finally satisfying. Eventually, Niebuhr argues, judgment returns to sobriety as the events of the world become less fragmented and the mixture of good and evil in every situation once again comes to the foreground. He concludes in thoughtful, self-reflective, and profound

language: “There is only momentary peace in an all-consuming passion, except it be a passion for what is indubitably the best. And what is the best?” (22)

After the war, America settled back into its routine of progress and industrial development. Optimistic visions of a global utopia were once again in full swing after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles and the coincident initiation of a League of Nations. But Niebuhr knew better than to buy into the rhetoric without looking at the realities. Even before the treaty was signed, while negotiations were still going on, Niebuhr reflected on the situation in a way that once again sheds light on his profound understanding of the relationship between rhetoric and reality, between ideals and actuals. Niebuhr’s entry from 1919 can be broken down in three sections. In the first section Niebuhr calls attention to an immediate event of political concern; “What a picture that is of Wilson, Lloyd George and Clemenceau settling the fate of the world in Paris! (24) Niebuhr argues that Wilson should have stayed home and thrown bolts from Olympus because by showing up in person, he was compromising too much to their demands. Even in this seemingly meaningless reflection Niebuhr has an eye on the communicative aspects of the situation: “If you have honest and important differences of opinion with others, it is better to write letters than to put your feet under the same table with them” because compromises were always more inevitable in face-to-face debates than in long distance ones (ibid). Once again, Niebuhr wows us with his common sense understanding of a rhetorical element in a given situation.

The next two elements in this entry are more important, for they reveal and highlight the emergent rhetorical dualism of Niebuhr that I’ve chosen to ground this dissertation’s organization. What is happening in Paris, Niebuhr notes, is that they are letting Wilson “label the transaction if the others can determine its true import.” Thus,

Niebuhr argues, “realities are exchanged for words” (24). For example, there will be no “indemnities” but there will be “reparations” made; there will be “no annexations” but there will be “mandates.” Niebuhr concludes with a summary analysis of the relationship that I quote at length because it shows that even in 1919 Niebuhr was weaving into his political and social theories an ethics of rhetoric, while he was simultaneously practicing a mode of rhetorical criticism himself:

Wilson is a typical son of the manse. He believes too much in words... Yet who knows? Time may yet give Mr. Wilson the victory. Words have certain meanings of which it is hard to rob them, and ideas may create reality in time. The league of nations may be, for the time being, merely a league of victors but it will be difficult to destroy the redemptive idea at the heart of it completely. Realities are always defeating ideals, but ideals have a way of taking vengeance upon the facts which momentarily imprison them.

On the other hand, it is always possible that diabolical facts will so discredit the idea which they ostensibly incarnate that they will necessitate the projection of a new idea before progress can be made. (24)

Thus begins Niebuhr’s fascination with the relationship between ideals and reality, a relationship that he almost always formulates as a dynamic one between words, thoughts, and actions. As America moved out of World War I, domestic social issues would come to the foreground of American thought and Niebuhr’s experiences in Detroit would allow him to test his hypotheses about these rhetorical relationships with lived experiences and adjust his theories accordingly.

After the World War I, things began to settle down in America. Over the next seven years Niebuhr would move from a position of a somewhat balanced nature between pessimism and optimism. But as Niebuhr would bump into more and more problems with modern society, his views of human nature would shift notably toward a more cynical viewpoint concerning man’s capacities for virtuous action. True, he would never

completely abandon his trust that man could do better. Sin was not equivalent to imperfection, he would often point out, and man's freedom and will mean that history is not normative and there is always a hope man can do better.

But Niebuhr was always a realist after his time in Detroit and always gravitated more toward the cynical view of man's nature. As we will see, this was the result of a rhetorical practice that continued to experience failures in Detroit. Niebuhr was frustrated. He thought that if only Detroit could see, hear, learn about the autoworkers' unjust situations, then they would be moved to help him alleviate those injustices. Likewise, he thought that if only Ford could see the love of Christ in his city and his workers, he would also be moved into just actions regarding his labor practices. In other words, at this point Niebuhr still held to a view of human nature that he would spend the next forty years trying to correct—that is, the ridiculous and unempirical notion that if only man *knew* the right thing to do, he would do it. On the contrary, Niebuhr would note seven years later; when man knows the right thing to do, will use it as a rationalization for his unjust actions, i.e. he will hide behind it; he will do the wrong thing *in the name of* the good.

The Making of a Prophet (1920-1927)

Niebuhr cut his prophetic teeth during his work as a leader and organizer for the labor movement during the first-half of the twenties. It was a formative time for Niebuhr's thought because it changed his outlook on human nature. It was a formative time for his voice because it was there that Niebuhr solidified his ministry as a prophetic one. In 1922, what would prove to be a big year for Niebuhr, he submitted his first article for publication to the *Christian Century*. The editor, Charles Clayton Morrison, turned it down but encouraged Niebuhr to keep trying. A month later, Niebuhr submitted a fifteen-hundred-

word essay titled "Romanticism and Realism in the Pulpit." Niebuhr was offered a choice between having his name on the essay or publishing it unsigned and receiving a ten-dollar fee (Fox 1985, 72). He chose the latter. The article was a launching point for Niebuhr's career as a popular writer. Morrison responded in a letter to Niebuhr asking for more essays, "Just send them in, as many as possible and as often as possible" (ibid). Niebuhr did, and for the next half-decade Niebuhr would dominate *Century's* pages.

It was also in 1922 that Bishop Charles D. Williams suggested to the founders of the Fellowship of a Christian Social Order (FCSO) that they consider using Niebuhr's talents as a first-rate organizer. The FCSO was an educational organization of liberal Christians who would study industrial capitalism and develop a Christian approach to reforming it (Fox 1985, 75). Together, Niebuhr and Williams established the Detroit branch of the FCSO. The timing was right for such an organization; a recent expose of the working conditions in the steel industry had recently brought church awareness of the labor-capital conflict to a peak (ibid). Thirty recruits showed up at their first official meeting in November. Had the FCSO only accomplished one thing, bringing Niebuhr and Williams together, it would remain an important historical fact in American history for this reason alone. Niebuhr knew Bishop Williams only six months before Williams passed of a heart attack. As Fox notes, this was a turning point for Niebuhr (76). Niebuhr's journal entry from *Leaves* records the profound impact Williams' death had on him:

Bishop Williams is dead. I sit and stare at the floor while I say that to myself and try to believe it. How strangely a vital personality defies the facts of death. Nowhere have I seen a personality more luminous with the Christ spirit than in this bishop who was also a prophet. Here was a man who knew how to interpret the Christian religion so that it meant something in terms of an industrial civilization. His fearless protagonism for the cause of democracy in industry won him the respect and love of the workers of the city as no other churchman possessed. Yet I'm afraid it must be admitted that he didn't change the prevailing attitude of Detroit industry by a hair's

breadth... If a bishop with all his prestige could make no bigger dent upon the prevailing mood of the city, what chance is there for the rest of us? Perhaps the best that any of us can do is to say: Charge once more and then and be dumb/Let the victors when they come/When the forts of folly fall/Find thy body by the wall.

From this moment on, Niebuhr would take up the torch Bishop Williams left for him. His prophetic ministry can, for all intents and purposes, be said to begin right here.

Niebuhr took up the prophetic task in his editorials. His prose for the *Century* was distinctive. Richard Fox collected and recorded some of the characteristics that marked Niebuhr's stamp on editorials: "hard-headed, vehement, [and] satirical," "A dash of disillusion, a sprinkling of hope; mild cynicism moderated by firm faith in future action or conversion," "self-consciously pointed, realistic, and masculine," "rhetorically explosive and determinedly paradoxical" (73-4). Niebuhr, was forever aghast at the "perils" facing modern civilization, discouraged over the "fathomless sentimentality" and "impotence" of the churches in the social arena, angered by the "hypocrisy" and "complacency" of the rich, of Christians, of America (74).

One of the most prominent problems Niebuhr came across in Detroit was the immense toll that Ford's automobile factories took on laborers, both physically and spiritually. After touring one of the local factories, Niebuhr reflected on the experience in his journal:

So artificial is life that these factories are like a strange world to me though I have lived close to them for many years. The foundry interested me particularly. The heat was terrific. The men seemed weary. Here manual labor is a drudgery and toil is slavery. The men cannot possibly find any satisfaction in their work. They simply work to make a living. Their sweat and their dull pain are part of the price paid for the fine cars we all run. And most of us run the cars without knowing what price is being paid for them.... We are all responsible. We all want the things which the factory produces and none of us is sensitive enough to care how much in human values the efficiency of the modern factory costs (Niebuhr 1980).

Typical of Niebuhr's journal, this experience becomes a moment to reflect on the rhetorical elements of his job as a pastor. "Beside the brutal facts of modern industrial life," he writes, "how futile are all our homiletical spoutings!.... If we knew the world in which we live a little better we would perish in shame or be overcome by a sense of futility" (ibid). One will note that Niebuhr's perennial question comes to the fore, once again; his rhetoric is felt to be futile *because* it isn't able to make the audience genuinely *feel* the suffering of the worker. If only we could *know* it, he writes. At this time in Niebuhr's life, an unqualified optimism in the power of reason and intelligence remains. Niebuhr makes the same argument that he would soon chastise John Dewey for making; Niebuhr had not yet learned that knowing the right thing to do and doing it were two completely different things.

Niebuhr's reference to futile "homiletical spoutings" brings us to another experience that greatly influenced his thoughts for many years: the seemingly impenetrable conscience of a lethargic audience. His situation, no doubt because of his pastoral calling, was always felt as a rhetorical one and the exigence was how to move his audiences out of this inertia. He reflects in his journal:

On the whole, people do not achieve great moral heights out of a sense of duty. You may be able to compel them to maintain certain minimum standards by stressing duty, but the highest moral in spiritual achievements depend not upon a push but upon a pull. People must be charmed into righteousness. The language of aspiration rather than that of criticism and command is the proper pulpit language. Of course it has its limitations. In every congregation there are a few perverse sinners who can go into emotional ecstasies about the city of God and yet not see how they are helping to make their city a hell-hole. It is not a good thing to convict sin only by implication. Sometimes the cruel word of censure must be uttered. "Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites" was spoken by one who incarnated tenderness. The language of aspiration is always in danger of becoming soft; but it is possible to avoid that pitfall and yet not sink into a habit of cheap scolding (Niebuhr 1980).

By this point Niebuhr's frustrations were high; he was unsure if it was even possible to preach the true gospel in America, where "happiness is gauged in terms of automobiles and

radios” and “the love of possession controls our home life” (Fox 1985, 88). In such a climate Niebuhr argued that idealistic motives were doomed. “It is not possible to attain the kingdom of God,” he wrote, “if you think you are already in the kingdom” (ibid). The “pious bourgeoisie of the Protestant churches” that Niebuhr encountered were intolerant of any preacher who tried to teach them a rigorous social ethic. Niebuhr surmised: “It seems that now, as in ancient times, the only safety for a prophet lies in itinerancy... the Christian religion will not seriously challenge the conscience of America until it is presented to the nation by men with such conviction and passion that a few martyrdoms will become inevitable” (ibid). “For us,” he argued, as it was for Amos, “the day of the Lord must be darkness and not light, and things must become worse before they can be better” (ibid). He was right. In 1927, Ford released the Model A and Niebuhr was aghast at its reception.

Niebuhr had spent over five years trying to solve the problems of industry and capitalism and yet, he had seen little to no progress. The reception of the new Model A made Niebuhr sick. “The new Ford car is out” he wrote. “The town is full of talk about it. Newspaper reports revealed that it is the topic of the day and all world centers. Crowds storm every exhibit to get the first glimpse of this new creation.” The car cost Ford about \$100 million to produce and after finishing it Ford “still has about a quarter of a billion dollars in the bank.” By Niebuhr’s math, “the car cost Ford workers at least fifty million in lost wages during the past year.” Niebuhr laments that “No one knows how many hundreds lost their homes in the period of unemployment, and how many children were taken out of school to help fuel the depleted family exchequer, and how many more children lived on short rations during this period.” It was enough for Niebuhr that Mr. Ford refused to concede he made a mistake in bringing the car out so late; what was worse was that Ford

had a way of impressing the public even with his mistakes. “We are now asked to believe that the whole idea of waiting a year after the old car stopped selling... was a great advertising scheme which reveals the perspicacity of this industrial genius” Niebuhr noted; “But no one asked about the toll in human lives.” He concludes with a tone of sheer frustration combined with dumbfounded awe:

What a civilization this is! Naïve gentleman with a genius for mechanics suddenly become the arbiters over the lives and fortunes of hundreds of thousands. Their moral pretensions are credulously accepted at full value. No one bothers to ask whether an industry which can maintain a cash reserve of a quarter of a billion ought not make some provision for its unemployed. Here it is enough that the new car is a good one. Here is a work of art in the only realm of art which we can understand. We will therefore refrain from making undue ethical demands upon the artist. Artist of all the ages have been notoriously unamenable to moral discipline. The cry of the hungry is drowned in the song, ‘Henry has made a lady out of Lizzy.’ (123)

In his last “Ford” article, Niebuhr argued that “Henry Ford is America”: like America, Ford applied the social intelligence of a country village to the most complex industrial life the world has ever known;” Like America, Ford was “well-intentioned, mechanically gifted, (and) exuberantly backward-looking in matters of social responsibility;” Neither America nor Ford were malevolent he argued, but both were “deluded innocents with flashes of exploitative genius.” In this prophetic polemic, we can see Niebuhr make a firm argumentative leap from the one to the many, i.e. from his parishioner/autoworkers’ problems with Henry Ford in Detroit, to America’s problems facing the onslaught of modernity.

This is notable because it is precisely at this time that Niebuhr receives an offer to join the faculty at Union Theological Seminary; true to scholastic form, when one stops talking about local problems and start talking about “man,” Niebuhr was now ready to join the academic conversation. Thus, as Niebuhr went forth an even greater leap would have to

be made. Ford, it turns out, wasn't just a misguided individual or apt symbol of what was wrong with America. Ford was Calicles and America was Athens. Ford was King Jeroboam and America was the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Ford, in other words, was a timeless manifestation of everything that is both good and bad in human nature. Ford was a man driven by a will-to-power in an immoral society that thought it was the embodiment of the great society, God's chosen people, the Kingdom of God.

The Rise of the Expert, Eclipse of the Public and the Onslaught of Modernity (1927-1932)

One of the things I've always found most fascinating when studying the philosophical writings of a given historical period, is the zeitgeist, the spirit of the times, which always feels like a mysterious and yet momentous force veiled behind the recorded thoughts themselves. During any given period certain phenomenon call themselves forth to the thinkers of the time and present themselves as the fundamental, perhaps even primordial problems of human existence. In order to get the feeling of a zeitgeist from the literature of a given period, it may require looking at several years, decades, or perhaps even centuries of writings; but in this instance, we need look no further than a singular year to discover the rhetorical situation Niebuhr found himself in during his rise to prominence as "America's theologian."

The following events took place in 1927 alone: the first transatlantic radio signal was transmitted (prompting the first regulatory political machine, the US Federal Radio Commission—later the FCC—was established); Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* premiered in Germany; the Bell Telephone Co. transmitted an image of Hoover in the first-ever successful long-distance demonstration of television; Lindberg made the first solo nonstop

transatlantic flight from New York City to Paris; Sacco and Vanzetti were executed; CBS was formed and went on air with 47 radio stations; “The Jazz Singer” was released (the first feature-length motion picture with synchronized dialogue sequences, i.e. “talkies”); Pan Am made its first flight (from Key West to Havana Cuba, no less); Trotsky was expelled from the Soviet Communist Party (leaving Stalin with undisputed control of the Soviet Union, where, in December, he condemned all deviators from the party line); Ford released the new Model A (after nineteen years of Model T production); the British Empire executed Indian revolutionaries; and finally, striking coal miners in Colorado were fired upon with machine guns by their own police department (6 were killed, 60 were injured).

Thus, the world was trying to catch its breath from the rapid changes that seemed to be adding a never before felt automatic and uncontrolled aspect to time and history. The beginning of the twentieth century is notable for its rapid technological and industrial innovation and the social and cultural tremors these innovations left in their wake. Telecommunications, assembly lines, urban sprawl, and nuclear warfare were important topics of discussion for political scientists, psychologists, and theologians alike. The scholastic and intellectual climate at the turn of the century reveal that these new developments were seen as growing crises that must be understood properly if humanity—much less democracy—was to survive them. An apocalyptic tone can be heard, even if faintly, in even the more optimistic thinkers of the period.

One can only imagine how uncertain the future must've seemed but if we look at the major works published during that same year, perhaps we can get an idea. It was in 1927, that perhaps the most important philosophical treatise written during the 20th century appeared on bookshelves in Germany for the first time. Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*

would shake the foundations of the philosophical world. In it, Heidegger addressed the relationship between the individual and the mass, concluding that the latter stood in the way of the former's ability to achieve an authentic existence. It was, in my opinion, an implicitly theological treatise without a transcendent God and thus, it falls into the category of another notable publication from the same year: Sigmund Freud's *Future of an Illusion*. This, in the same year that Bertrand Russell penned *Why I am Not a Christian* and Oswald Chambers authored the all-time best-selling Christian text, other than the Bible, ever written: *My Utmost for His Highest*. It is finally worth noting that during this same year for the nephew, Edward Bernays—the “Father of Public Relations”—combined his uncle's work with his own ideas on crowd psychology, and in 1928 published the results in a book titled simply *Propaganda*. There, Bernays argued that manipulation as necessary in a rational and dangerous society that was ruled by the “herd instinct.” A few years later, Hitler would pen *Mein Kampf*. Germany wasn't alone in dealing with the new problems arising from large, ideologically driven collective action. In Spain, Jose Ortega y Gasset was already observing what he would call “the revolt of the masses.”⁷

So it was that across several thousand miles of ocean, the US was also experiencing new problems that were characterized by the relationship between the individual and the mass, or as American writers would call it, in a truly democratic fashion that hesitated to condemn the *demos*, “the public.” Walter Lippmann, John Dewey, and Reinhold Niebuhr shared this common rhetorical situation in the second decade of the 20th century. For all three of these writers industry, technology, and the applied sciences were creating a more complex society in which the consequences of individual actions were far more

⁷ It is notable, that Niebuhr would review both of these texts, the former in the original German, and with a section on propaganda excluded from the English translation.

unpredictable than they were at previous times in history. Their analyses of their historical exigencies are instructive because they were remarkably so similar, despite some divergences, or in the case of Dewey and Niebuhr, their stark contrasts. Perhaps the most notable and lasting influential voices during America's transition into the technological age, all three thinkers bore witness to an unprecedented war that posed new dilemmas concerning the delicate balance between isolationist foreign policies and the responsibilities of power; all three saw the rise of machination and technology that would create a new man—one that Hannah Arendt would dub *animal laborans*; and all three profoundly, perhaps prophetically, perceived the problematic rise of new social forces on freshly alienated individuals and the role that communication played in both fostering and controlling these communal sentiments. In other words, all three of these thinkers recognized that the world was changing rapidly and agreed, that a fresh look at how individuals develop community ties and function as cohesive publics was an imperative subject of study, if America was to face the new demands of modernity intelligently.

One of America's "first-responders" to the growing concern about individuals' relationships with society was journalist Walter Lippmann. In 1925 he published *The Phantom Public*, where he developed themes from his first prominent work, *Public Opinion* (1922). For Lippmann, the impetus was still on the creativities and limitations of individuals. In *Public Opinion*, Lippmann noted the cognitive limitations inherent in dealing with a rapidly changing world and hypothesized that in order to cope with such a vast, complex society, individuals' dependence upon irrational stereotypes would grow substantially (Shinn 2009a). In 1925, Lippmann would argue that the "public" was a theoretical fiction, and that the role of government was primarily an administrative

problem to be solved as efficiently as possible, so that people could get on with their own individualistic pursuits” (Lippmann 1922). Lippmann saw a world where the few, the agents in a given situation, are the responsible parties for change and where bystanders, those often theoretically lumped into one cohesive “public,” are usually just “deaf spectators in the back row” (Bybee 1999, 48).

John Dewey took his turn at analyzing the new world and he targeted Lippmann’s analysis directly. In *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey argued that the public was not a mere fiction, but rather had been “eclipsed” due to rapid increases in technology’s range of consequences that were not met with the response of an evolving state that changed along side it (Lippmann 1925, 13). For Dewey, the fate of democracy was not quite as certain as Lippmann made it out to be. The solution wasn’t in a few experts who could run the show, so to speak, but was instead in maintaining a truly experimental perspective toward the organization of the public. This, for two reasons: first, the scientific method called for experimentation and showed how successful such experiments were in developing better and new solutions to old problems; and secondly, the flux of time called for experimentation due to the fact that a government made to organize a public yesterday could not very well organize a different public, with its difference features and traits, equally well. In other words, what worked yesterday might not work today and the only way to find what will work today is to try new things and test them out.

At the same time that Dewey published *The Public and Its Problems* a young Midwestern pastor without a graduate degree published his first book, which has never been reprinted and is seldom read. Niebuhr was beginning his transition from advocate-pastor to advocate-philosopher. During his last year in Detroit, he penned his first large-

scale response to the growing crises of modern living, by posing the exigence for his inquiry as a rhetorical question: *Does Civilization Need Religion?* (1927) There, Niebuhr formally laid all the new phenomena of his time, closely examining their pros and cons. Niebuhr was never one prone to nostalgia and no matter how much trouble he thought a new situation might bring, he was never one to think we can “go back” to a better time and place. Instead, Niebuhr tried to use the tools he had to address the problems he could, as pragmatically as possible. In this work, as a pastor and popular columnist for *Christian Century*, that meant asking how religion might aid in solving for some of the inevitable failures of modernity. Although Niebuhr would adjust his solutions to these problems over time, many of his core ideas would remain forever, and regardless, his analysis of the problems themselves is instructive.

By 1927 Niebuhr had become a popular speaker and columnist throughout the country. He summarized his experiences with Detroit’s workers, citizens and factory owners in the first of his twenty-five books, *Does Civilization Need Religion?* Although published in 1927, Niebuhr was working on it as far back as 1923. It is important for our analysis of his rhetorical situation because it takes all of the specific problems he encountered in Detroit and conceptualizes them into their larger, broader categories for investigation. While trying to make religion relevant to the autoworker Niebuhr ran into problems with the basic societal structure developing in his industrial city and, noting that the industrial cities were growing in number, sought to express these problems to other pastors seeking religious resources for their respective laities.

Upon doing so, Niebuhr encountered a new threat to society: specialization. "The world is filled with men who are pathologically incapable of doing anything with life

outside the rounds of their specialization," he wrote in an editorial in the *Detroit Times* in 1925 (Tabscott 2009). In a column he began to write for the *Detroit Times* in early 1928, Niebuhr notes the inevitable and unstoppable drift toward specialization. "While this tendency makes for productive and professional efficiency," he writes, "the loss in spiritual, social, and moral values is tremendous. If we are not careful, we will all develop into a society of undereducated experts who know a great deal about a small area of life and very little about life itself" (Brown 1992, 35).

Niebuhr found that the industrial worker was indifferent to religion for two basic reasons. First, Niebuhr noted that it was "partly because he is enmeshed in relations which are so impersonal and fundamentally unethical that his religious sense atrophies in him" (1927, 5-6). On the other hand, Niebuhr notes, "he is hostile to religion because he observes the ethical impotence of the religion of the privileged classes, particularly in its failure to effect improvement in economic and social attitudes" (ibid). He concludes:

The industrial worker raises a general characteristic of modern urban man to a unique degree. His own experiences help him to see the moral limitations of modern civilization more clearly than do the more privileged classes; but what is true of him is generally true of all members of a complex society in which human relations are impersonal and complicated (ibid).

For Niebuhr, there was one reason why religion might be of use in solving man's modern problems and that was that the development of new technologies was presenting new ethical problems, which meant then, that religion was a potential solution to them. It is notable, to understand Niebuhr's experimental and empirical method, that he doesn't start by assuming that it can. Instead, he argues that in order to find out if it can, we must analyze the problems and then analyze the state of religion.

As Niebuhr saw it, the industrial worker was without religion and was thereby lacking one (not the *only*) of his useful tools for achieving an ethical community and existence. Religion's job, as Niebuhr understood it at this time—which was very much a Jamesian understanding—was to promote the value and dignity of “personality.” Niebuhr's ability to grasp both sides of the same coin is unrivaled and his analysis of this problem shows that his characteristic dialectical thinking—which will provide the framework for this entire dissertation—manifests in even his earliest thought. This religious task was being attacked on two sides and thus it had to “face and do battle with two enemies, those who do not believe in men because they do not believe in God, and those who do not believe in God because modern civilization has robbed them of their faith in the moral integrity of men” (1927, 7). Here we see Niebuhr's typical method of addressing problems. His ability to provide an aphorism that poetically sums up a problem and then the coinciding explanation of the aphorism in more succinct and detailed language. Following this particular aphorism, Niebuhr develops and explains the twofold problem this way:

The industrial worker is indifferent to religion, partly because he is enmeshed in relations which are so impersonal and fundamentally unethical that his religious sense atrophies in him. On the other hand he is hostile to religion because he observes the ethical impotence of the religion of the privileged classes, particularly in its failure to effect improvement in economic and social attitudes (1927, 15).

For Niebuhr then, looking at the problem begins by asking why it is a new problem, i.e. Why has man abandoned religion *now*? Niebuhr acknowledges that the importance placed on reason by the sciences, especially in their applied technologies, have a tendency to decrease the amount of faith one puts in “irrational” beliefs. But Niebuhr isn't convinced this is the real problem and he moves into the prophetic element of his analysis, i.e. he always looks at tree in his own people's eye before he points out the splinter in the other's.

The real reason that the middle-class worker abandoned religion was pretty obvious to Niebuhr. Steeped in a Jamesian pragmatist philosophy, Niebuhr knew that if religion was being abandoned, it wasn't because it was a logical proposition that had failed. Instead, it must be tied to the fact that it wasn't serving the needs of people that it had formerly served. For Niebuhr, if religion was being doubted, it wasn't because of a Cartesian doubt of a rational proposition, hardly; it was that experiences in the world were no longer calling forth religious varieties of them. In other words, it was that modern industry and its capitalist government were founded and institutionalized by a Christian society. Niebuhr writes, "The fact is that more men in our modern era are irreligious because religion has failed to make civilization ethical than because it has failed to maintain its intellectual respectability" (1927, 12). If a Christian culture could allow and even promote such developments, the autoworker was reasonable in his rejection of such a belief system because it coincided with so much misery for himself and his family. In other words, those who got modern man into the situation he now faced professed religion and thus, it was unclear to the middle-classes how it could possibly be of help in getting him out.

Religion's situation then, is that being pushed on both sides by two forces—on the one side its metaphysics challenged by science and on the other its ethics are being challenged by the facts of injustice—and unable to fight both simultaneously, it has chosen to do battle with the former because "It is easier to challenge the idea of an impersonal universe than to change the fact of an impersonal civilization" (1927, 7). In other words, religion's first problem was one of vocabulary: it hasn't been able to restate its affirmations in a way that make them consistent with scientific facts. Niebuhr knew that religion and science could and would eventually coincide perfectly if only time was allowed to run its

course. No truly deterministic theory could win out in the end and as he put it, “Outraged truth has a way of avenging itself” (1927, 8). More importantly, religion’s logical victory would be in vain if the facts on the ground didn’t change as well.

These facts on the ground are mechanization, efficiency and complexity. First, the mechanization of society makes an ethical life more necessary at the same time that it makes it more difficult and furthermore, it makes ethical failures more obvious than was ever previously the case (13). It isn’t necessarily that we are less ethical than our fathers; it is that we are more dependent than our fathers were on an ethical society. Secondly, the speed and efficiency of both commerce and communications have brought the world into intimate causal relations without the coincident intimacy of living in close quarters with one another and without “increasing the spiritual dynamic and ethical intelligence which makes close contact sufferable” (ibid). Third, Niebuhr notes that we have also multiplied the tools of destruction that this “confused conscience” now wields and thus have armed our evil natures with scientific and technological precision and efficiency. Finally, we have developed a complex society that Niebuhr argues cannot be made more ethical solely by goodwill alone because our moral purpose in this complex existence demands an astute guide (ibid). In other words, modern man is negatively judging the US’s morality as a fruit of its religion and forgetting that morality is also the root of religion, and that these roots require a fertile soil, which the mechanization of society has destroyed. Niebuhr’s concludes that modern man’s most pressing problem, is the problem of his “aggregate existence” (1927, 17). If man is to live in harmony with his fellow men while the size and intricacy of his social machinery continues to emphasize the vices, which make life more inhuman, then he must maintain a rigorous ethic.

Furthermore, the existential aspects of the problem made its solution potentially religious. First, human beings seek the development of a harmonious and unified personality and second, they also seek to express and assert this unified personality in defiance of nature's indifference and contempt (1927, 19). Niebuhr notes the coincident rise in popular psychology and decline of religious belief as evidence of this fact before pointing out that even if religion fails to make society more ethical, any analysis of the resources of religion will show that it will always maintain at least some vitality due to this aspect of its nature. As far as religion's adequacy in solving both sides of this problem, Niebuhr concludes that religion's "rejuvenation waits upon a reorientation of its ethical traditions as well as of its theological conceptions" (1927, 220). But he extends this solution into what can be understood as a typical Niebuhrian paradox. It is precisely the rational formulation of religious truths that destroy their ultra-rational powers and it is precisely religion's existential solvency that gets in the way of it engaging in a rigorous morality. The solution to the first problem then was that the critical (rational) and naively reverent (irrational) aspects of religious belief were to be maintained in ongoing tension. The solution to the second problem was that the ethical (worldly) and the mystical (other-worldly) qualities of religious devotion were to also maintain a tight tension. The resultant solution, for Niebuhr, was "spiritualized technicians" who demonstrated an intelligent worldly knowledge and an ultra-rational faith in God, who lived in a qualified asceticism, an existence of "attached detachment."

Thus, in 1927 Niebuhr was choosing sides in lines already drawn in the intellectual-sand. Niebuhr chose Lippmann's side when, in his last chapter of *DCNR?* he writes, "Rejuvenation and progress must come from the few who understand the fuller

implications of the faith which they share with the multitudes whose eyes are holden and who lack the courage to follow even such visions as may come to them (Niebuhr 1927, 227). This highly spiritual religion can't be the esoteric possession to which the multitudes may never aspire, thus making it a priestly cult (1927, 227-228). For Niebuhr, it must not lose confidence in the masses but must nevertheless resist the gravitation toward moral mediocrity among them. It must be a layman's movement that expresses itself in rebuilding the social order and not rebuilding religious institutions. These spiritualized-technicians should have the technical skill and spiritual resources to deal with the practical problems of industry and politics without succumbing to the errors of making mechanical efficiency and material rewards ends in themselves. In other words, they must be in this world and yet not of the world by promoting a religiously inspired moral idealism that centers life in something beyond nature but yet, is qualified by nature as well. Such other-worldliness, he would argue in a 1941 *Christianity and Society* article, "is not an escape from history. It gives us a fulcrum from which we can operate in history. It gives us a faith by which we can seek to fulfill our historic tasks without illusions and without despair."⁸ Niebuhr's (1927) conclusion sets the stage for what is to follow in our analysis of his mythic, dialectic, and rhetorical inquiries. He writes:

Men need to subject all partial moral achievements to comparison with the absolute standards of truth, beauty and goodness of their religious faith, and yet be able to see and willing to concede the relativities in the absolute values of their devotion. They can be saved from a morality of mere utilitarianism only by the religious quest for an absolute moral standard; yet they need to be discerning enough to see that every ethical achievement, even when inspired by religious motives, is tinged with prudential self-interest. They must continue to strive after freedom and yet realize that human life and character is largely determined by environment. If they seek happiness, divorced from fortune, they nevertheless escape the duty of making the material world serve human welfare. Their ability to discover the transcendent

⁸ (Brown 1992, 114)

values in human personality has value only if they maintain faith in human nature after they have discovered its imperfections. They must search after the perfect goodness in God and yet be prepared to face the cruelties of life without either denying their reality or being driven to despair by them. (224-5)

Conclusion

This was Niebuhr's alternative way out of the crises of the 1920s. It was a time when political normalcy spelled corruption, passivity and parochialism.⁹ It was a time when business prosperity morphed into corporate capitalism, the domestication of labor, the maldistribution of wealth, and growth in income inequality. The middle class withdrew from social responsibility due to social atomization. Intellectuals turned to nihilism and cynicism, expatriating to Europe or escaping to lofts in Greenwich Village. Liberals and progressives were disillusioned and in general, they chose one of two paths. The first path led to the constant questioning of every value and meaning without attribution of an positive alternative. The second path led to the adoption of an alternate outlook as a new synthesis that would give life meaning. Those who chose the first path called themselves the "lost generation." They retreated to psychology's aesthetic remedies for their liberal discontents and literally fled areas saturated with the "booboisie." Those who chose the second path search for new creeds to replace the old ones and engaged in new activities of reconstruction, reformation, and revolution. Some disillusioned progressives turned racist and preached white supremacy. Some former social gospelers became hardline Christian fundamentalists. Most however, moved to the other side of the political spectrum and embraced the Socialist ideal.

Niebuhr chose both of the paths during his years in Detroit. He constantly searched for a radical alternative, and his skepticism about the very existence of such an alternative,

⁹ Much of this summary of the 1920s intellectual climate is drawn from (Naveh 2009).

combined with his reluctance to abandon the basic premises of liberal Christianity, characterized his thought during the 1920s. His journal from the 1920s reveals the deeply felt personal dilemma regarding these two paths. It is true, that in his most popular and moving work, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr almost lost sight of the balance. *Moral Man*, the *New York Times* heralded as the “Doctrine of Christ and Marx linked.”¹⁰ Niebuhr was rejecting ideas, not people, but he could not, according to Fox (1985), “help implying that the people who held the ideas were fools.” *Moral Man’s* tone was an integral part of the message; it was rhetorical vehemence in order to spark a feeling of crisis and the militant commitment needed to engage its contingency. “The book rumbles and thunders along, cerebral and pugnacious,” Fox argues. Only a few months before its publication, he attended a banquet in John Dewey’s honor; yet only three pages into *Moral Man*, he dismissed Dewey as a “tepid apostle of rational experimentation and political gradualism,” “platitudinous,” and a confused analyst who has “no clear counsels about the way to overcome social inertia.” Niebuhr’s response was thought provoking because it suggested that it might be necessary to use violence and condoned force if it could be used with “the tempo of a surgeon’s skill” so that “healing” could “follow quickly upon its wounds.” In other words, Niebuhr was calling for a revolution, but was demanding it be ethical.

Moral Man was a departure from the balance and a temporary abandonment of the hope of a lay-movement of spiritualized-technicians. He was surveying Sodom and Gomorrah, and speaking from on high, intoning that not one righteous man could be found in America, that complete destruction may be needed. Disillusioned by Detroit, Niebuhr fell in line with Lippmann momentarily. Like Lippmann, Niebuhr saw society as “a

¹⁰ (Fox 1985, 136)

realm of power blocs to be adjusted, not a garden in need of regeneration.” America’s cultural pluralism left it devoid of moral consensus. “We are merely a vast horde of people let loose on a continent with little to unify us by way of a common cultural, moral, and religious traditions... We are held together mechanically by our means of production and communication.” Fox records that in the first chapter of *Moral Man*, Niebuhr drew the battlelines: “The dream of perpetual peace and brotherhood for human society is one which never be fully realized... Society is in a perpetual state of war” (140). Niebuhr didn’t speak about the Kingdom of God or about realizing individual personality. With millions out of work, what was the point? Justice, not love, was the goal of Christian action in society; revolution, not love, was the Christian’s final social appeal. Some of his colleagues were taken aback and viewed the book as a personal attack. Hadn’t Niebuhr spent ten years speaking about pacifism and moral appeals? This was not Niebuhr the Amos-like prophet but Niebuhr the Joshua-like warrior, whose deepest intention was “the interruption of the course of the world.” Like Joshua, his “intention sprang his violence, his impatience, and his anger; from it, too, sprang the ever-renewed attempts to cut the world to the heart [or sing it to sleep].”¹¹ Niebuhr was searching for a third way, but he had not yet found it.

If nothing else, the intellectual exchanges that followed *Moral Man*’s publication seemed to prove Niebuhr’s point that “reason is always the servant of interest in a social situation. Men of high education and goodwill went for one another’s jugular.”¹² Perhaps the most telling response to *Moral Man* came from the one reader that Niebuhr could count on for a sympathetic reading and a honest analysis: his brother Richard. Reinhold burned all of his correspondence with his brother, but Richard’s letters from Reinhold remain. By

¹¹ (Benjamin and Tiedemann 1999, 318) Benjamin is describing Baudelaire here.

¹² (Fox 1985, 143)

Richard's estimates, Reinhold was cynical and skeptical but displayed traces that he "had hope—not much but a little, and faith, not a great deal but some." Richard arguing that he regarded *Moral Man* alongside Lippmann's *Preface [to Morals]* as the most important religious books written since the war. "But neither of them are finality. They are the death of the old man and insofar the harbingers of a new birth," Richard wrote.¹³ Richard thought Reinhold's movement toward Socialism displayed the skeptical hope against hope that ideals could be effective in guiding action. This was a liberal illusion, according to Richard, and he was even bold enough to tell Reinhold that he predicted he would realize it soon enough and return to the more detached position he had abandoned. Richard thought "that an activism which stresses immediate results is the cancer of our modern life" and that it was "betraying us constantly into interfering with events, pushing, pulling, trying to wriggle out of an impassable situation, and so drawing the noose tighter around our necks. We want to be saviors of civilization, he argued, and simply bring down new destruction... You are about ready to break with that activism. I think I discern that." Richard was wrong. Reinhold would never give up "teleological" politics; nor would he stop "interfering with events." He would never renounce his view that religion was a powerful force of energy in the social struggle.

Yet, Niebuhr would subsequently choose a different path; a third way, in which he could be active in the world of political appearances and yet detached as an observer. His personal involvement in the Socialist Party ceased and he would never again run for political office or jostle in the corridors of Party conventions. Instead, he articulated a Jamesian "double-jointedness," a constant "both/and" in the face of the irrational absurdity

¹³ (Fox 1985, 144)

of such a proposition. Niebuhr took up a prophetic position on the mountaintop—"a place from which all politics could be subjected to judgments." Religious action meant developing "theory and profound theory," resisting "temptations to premature revolt by the disciples of activism which wants to act without having a clear-cut notion of what action is all about."¹⁴ Niebuhr argued that the church's survival was dependent on its role as a leavening portion, one that would provide spiritual and moral discipline to civilization, one that would provide insight into the intensity of human egotism, one that would speak the truth about human selfhood boldly. He affirmed the permanent power of mythic truths in the face of incoherency and he reaffirmed the need for a discriminating dialectical intelligence. He used both affirmations to address his audiences in both noble, sacred terms, and in secular, profane ones. He called attention to the appearances of the world and, instead of retreating to the woods of his fatherland or the lofts of Greenwich Village; he faced the realm of tragedy, the realm of justice, and stared it straight in the eye. He spoke a "woe!" and a "nay!" when it was needed, and yet, in spite of his prophetic polemical attitude, he spoke words of love and mercy, forgiveness and contrition. Our task then, is to understand how Niebuhr managed such a balance.

¹⁴ (Fox 1985, 146)

Chapter 2 Mythic Narrative: The Nature and Destiny of Man

By universal truths are to be understood the kinds of things a certain type of person will probably or necessarily say or do in a given situation; and this is the aim of poetry.

—Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (1451b1-5)

But in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in watching this, and fast things; by pureness, by knowledge, by long-suffering, like kindness, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned, by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, by honor and dishonor, by evil report and good report; as DECEIVERS and YET TRUE; is unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.

—II Corinthians 6:4-10

At the time of Paul's letter to a small Christian sect in Roman occupied Greece, his reputation as a thinker was questionable at best, for he had been publicly dishonored. Paul was subjected to "evil reports" about his character; in short, he was accused of being a liar, a false prophet, and a deceiver for preaching that Jesus was the Christ, the messiah the Old Testament prophets foretold would come. But if Paul believed he had a hold of the Truth, the question remains for us, as it remained for Niebuhr, why he admits the charges against him before refuting them. Niebuhr entertains one hypothesis: it could be that Paul, having committed to a rhetorical trope, simply wished to preserve the unbroken line of paradoxical statements; "If this be the case," he writes "a mere cannon of rhetorical style has prompted a very profound statement" about the nature of preaching the gospel.

The truth in this passage by Paul, according to Niebuhr, is one for every apologist of the Christian faith, who would do well to understand that they are teachers of the truth by deception.¹⁵ Niebuhr draws on this Paulean passage to illustrate a timeless truth about the nature of profound religious myths. Religious myths point to the ultimate ground and the ultimate fulfillment of existence. So all great religious myths deal with creation and redemption, Niebuhr argues. “But since myth cannot speak of the trans-historical without using symbols and events in history as its form of expression, it invariably falsifies the facts of history, as seen by science, to state its truth” (*ICE*, 7). This is the reason that religion must always confess, along with St Paul, that they are “as deceivers yet true.”

Myth is often considered to be a key element in rhetoric and public discourse and a number of scholars have explored the relationship between myth and rhetoric (Jasinski 2001, 382). Roderick Hart, for example, defines myths as “master stories describing exceptional people doing exceptional things and serving as moral guides to proper action” and accordingly, he notes that “Virtually all rhetoric depends on myth for its effect” (1997, 234, 242). Cultural Historian Richard Slotkin argues that myths are stories drawn from social memory “that have acquired through persistence usage the power of symbolizing that society’s ideology or dramatizing its moral consciousness—with all the complexities and contradictions that consciousness may contain” (1992, 5). Furthermore, they may serve a rhetorical function; for as Slotkin notes, they are “formulated as ways of explaining problems that arise in the course of historical experience” (*Ibid.*, 6). Jasinski argues that myths, in short, “are narratives that report the struggles and heroic exploits from a community’s past” (383). These narratives or myths, Jasinski and Rushing & Frenz (1995)

¹⁵ (Niebuhr 1937, 3) (hereafter cited as *BT*).

agree, are mixtures of archetypal elements that transcend the local community's boundaries and unique cultural elements, specific to the society that holds them (Jasinski 2001, 383).

In addition to general agreement on what myths are, rhetoric scholars are generally in agreement on their function as behavioral and cognitive reference points for a culture or community. "Myths explain the world and suggest ways of coping with it," Jasinski argues (Ibid). Doty (1986) argues that myths are normative in supporting particular types of behavior and association and rejecting others, they are educative and heuristic (29). Weiss (1969) suggests that myths "condition the way men [sic] view the world and understand their experience" (3-4).

Niebuhr distinguished between "primitive" and "profound" myths. Primitive or "pre-scientific" myths try to simplify the world into a simple system of meaning, i.e. "monism," or they completely divide the world into two distinct spheres, natural and supernatural, i.e. "strict dualism." Niebuhr argues that prescientific myths "disregard what may have always been known, or have now become known, about the ordered course of events in the world."¹⁶ Permanent myths, on the other hand, "are those which describe some meaning or reality, which is not subject to exact analysis but can nevertheless be verified in experience" (ibid.). Their truth is usually verified in experiences in the realm of history and freedom beyond the structures and laws of natural existence. These distinctions between "primitive" and "permanent" myths are significant because they provide us a hint into how Niebuhr combined two schools of thought into his understanding of myth: pragmatism and Hegelian dialectics.

¹⁶ (Niebuhr 1955, 97) (hereafter cited as *SDH*).

Niebuhr's analysis of myth and religious experiences is firmly rooted in the Jamesian pragmatist tradition. First, for both Niebuhr and James, the truth was always verified by experience. Second, Niebuhr recognized the power of vocabularies to change perceived realities. Niebuhr notes in a parenthetical aside that "it would be better to use the word *symbol* to avoid the skeptical connotation of the word "myth" and later, that the question of myths and symbols contains the whole problem of the tension between Hellenic and Hebraic cultural components in the West. In his later years, and much like his pragmatist brethren, Niebuhr would wonder if you would have been more successful in his goal had he changed his vocabulary; suggesting that he would probably should have called Original Sin, "the universality of self-concern."

Third, like his predecessors—Peirce, James, and Dewey—and his successors—Rorty, Dickstein, and Diggins—Niebuhr constantly tries to get rid of what he doesn't like in the traditional canons while holding onto what might be permanently valid in them. He writes, "The essential truth in a great religious myth cannot be gauged by the immediate occasion which prompted it; nor apprehended in its more obvious intent;" "neither it's doubtful origin nor the fantastic character of its purported history will obscure its essential message to those who are wise enough to discern the permanently valid insights in primitive imagination" (*BT*, 27). Thus, with a Jamesian eye, Niebuhr attempted to find the essential and verifiable truths in religious experiences while constructing them in vocabularies that brought them to life for modern man. But only one Niebuhrian eye was set on James's method: "James's analysis of religious life is defective," Niebuhr wrote, because it showed no concern "for the meaning of history" (Diggins 2011, 31). To understand the difference

between an individual's religious experience and a collective's, one had to venture into the realm of myth and history, of collective origins and collective destinies.

Niebuhr's concern with historical meaning brings us to the second major influence on his mythology: Hegel's dialectical method. Hegel believed that dialectics were about antagonistic perspectives, contradictions, clashing opinions, and the processes by which these antagonisms were worked out (Jasinski 2001, 166). Unlike the classical understandings of dialectics as the opposition of two contrary *propositions*, Hegel shifted the substance of dialectics to conflicting *terms* or *concepts* (Rescher 1977, 52). Seeking to show how concepts in conflict at one level were linked together at another level, Hegel demonstrated that mutually exclusive terms might really involve one another. This method of dialectics is an important facet of Niebuhr's thought.

Wellek and Warren's (1956) definition of myth then, is perhaps the most relevant for an exploration of Niebuhr's distinctively Hegelian theology; for them, myth meant "any anonymously composed storytelling of origins and destinies: the explanations a society offers its young of why the world is and why we do as we do, its pedagogic images of the nature and destiny of man" (191). It is apropos that Niebuhr's *magnum opus*, originally delivered as the renowned Gifford Lectures, was published as, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. The nature of man is characterized according to the *from whence* he came, his origin. The destiny of man is a story about *to where* he is going, his end, his *fini* and/or his *telos*.

Niebuhr defined myth differently throughout his works but he aptly captured them all when he wrote: "All mythology is a philosophy of history," for if history is to have meaning, it must have a mythology.¹⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr. summarizing Niebuhr's view

¹⁷ (Niebuhr 1934, 123) (hereafter cited as *REE*).

of the connection between myth and history, writes: “The myth is a story, the origin of which is generally forgotten, which serves to explain the basis of a religious practice or belief. The myth is an artistic attempt to give depth to history” (1992, 275). Accordingly then, whenever a philosophy of history was used to explain the basis of an organized social practice, Niebuhr understood the philosophy as a “myth” and the social practices it made normative as “religious.”

Myths, or as he sometimes called them “principles of interpretation,” covered a much broader range of human action than was typically understood by modern emphases on the “primitive” aspects of mythology. From Niebuhr’s perspective, Christianity was no different in kind—i.e. a myth—than naturalism, Marxism, humanism, socialism, communism, idealism, and romanticism. In other words, where one finds a philosophy, implied or explicit, of man’s nature and destiny, one found a mythology; where one found it influencing human actions, one found a religion. All “isms” then, were systems of meaning that, in the final analysis, rested on some irrational or supra-rational proposition that depended on a certain amount of “faith.” Furthermore, Niebuhr insisted that for a myth, religion, or system of meaning to produce and maintain moral vigor, it was imperative that it be profoundly dialectical.

Perhaps not since Hegel has there been a more dialectical thinker than Reinhold Niebuhr and perhaps not since Augustine or Plato has there been a more profoundly paradoxical and ironic dialectician. Regardless of the many and diverse interpretations and misinterpretations of Niebuhr's theology, politics, ethics and philosophy, there is one fact about Reinhold Niebuhr that in all of my research on him I've yet to find disagreement on, and that is that Reinhold Niebuhr is a supreme dialectician. Even the titles of most of his

published works display this talent for profound dualisms: *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, *Christianity and Power Politics*, *The Nature and Destiny Of Man*, *Faith and History*, *The Children Of Light and The Children Of Darkness*, *The Self and The Dramas Of History*, *Love and Justice*, *Faith and Politics*, *Man's Nature And His Communities*.

In order to understand what role these dualisms play in Niebuhr's thought it is important to understand "Christian Realism." Niebuhr's thought, if it can be fairly categorized at all, is best understood as a brand of "Christian Realism" and the best synthesis I've found of exactly what this label entails is Larry Rasmussen's synthesis from his introduction to a collection of Niebuhr's theological essays: *Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life* (Rice 2009). Niebuhr's realism gets him accused of pessimism at times, and when completely bastardized, it gets him cast as an apologist for power who "prefers cautious gradualism to risking a better world through bold action" (20). This is why Niebuhr's Christian Realism gets transposed into conservative and neoconservative political creeds; but the transposition is unjust. For Niebuhr, realism simply meant recognizing that while humans are both self-regarding and other-regarding, or social, the impulses of the former are generally stronger than the latter. Furthermore, even the latter impulses lose some of their virtue because they are often compounded into collectives that serve the self-regarding egotism as well, as in when nationalism or patriotism are fed by individual psychological feelings of pride and self-righteousness. In this sense, we can see that Niebuhr was never an apologist for power; he was just realistic about its role in political action. As Niebuhr writes, political and moral realism is "the disposition to take all

factors in a social and political situation, which offer resistance to establish norms, into account, particularly the factors of self-interest and power.”¹⁸

Rasmussen notes that it is the qualifier “Christian” that leads directly to the structure of Niebuhr’s thought as dialectical, i.e. as one between idealism and realism (ibid., 20). He notes that, “Niebuhr characteristically moved between the polar elements of certain theologically crucial pairs. Both terms of each pair were equally real for him: the ideal and the real, the absolute and the contingent, the infant and the finite, the eternal Kingdom of God and the flux of history” (ibid.). The dialectic of Niebuhr’s thought can be seen as early as a 1916 article for the *Atlantic*, written when he was twenty-four years old. In this early essay, despite having not yet explicitly formulated his personal brand of Christian Realism, the interplay of ideal/real, absolute/relative, and eternity/time—“the dialectic of his thought”—was already a prominent aspect of his method (ibid., 21). Rasmussen concludes that, “Niebuhr always thought dialectically and paradoxically, though many of his readers have been prone to relax the tension of his extremes. Niebuhr never relaxed the tension. He discerned and decided amidst the play of antinomies, one set of which was ideal/real” (ibid.).

Aside from being a Christian Realist, Niebuhr is often lumped into the theological camp of neo-orthodoxy. This isn’t unfair but it is much too simple for a paradoxical thinker like Niebuhr, who typically loathed any form of systematic—and therefore abstract and unpragmatic—conceptualizations. Niebuhr plainly refuted the accusation that he was a neo-orthodox theologian, or even a theologian at all. Instead, he argued that he found himself much more in the camp of liberalism than the neo-orthodox tradition of

¹⁸ (Niebuhr 1953, 119) (hereafter cited as *CRPP*).

theologians like Emil Brunner Karl Barth. This may seem like a trivial scholastic argument and on some level I'm sure it is; but Niebuhr's disagreements and agreements with both liberalism and neo-orthodoxy actually reveal another ongoing dialectic in his thought that justifies the framework for how I've chosen to separate a particular Niebuhrian binary for my analysis here: that of timeless and special words.

Niebuhr wanted to sharply distinguish religion and politics from one another and at the same time relate them to one another. It is this latter aspect that is the "neo" in "neo-orthodoxy." Another aspect of neo-orthodoxy Niebuhr held to was the rejection of a belief in human perfectibility and the inevitability of progress and, acceptance of a belief in human freedom, the capacity for transcendence, and Luther's "Hidden God" of justice and mercy. Lastly, neo-orthodoxy also held to the belief that one should take the Christian symbols seriously but not literally, a belief that is pertinent to grasp in order to understand how Niebuhr viewed religion and myths. Thus, it is fair to call Niebuhr a neo-orthodox theologian.

Were it not for his outright and explicit rejections of neo-orthodox theologians there wouldn't be a debate at all. "I have never thought of myself in their [Brunner and Barth] category," Niebuhr writes; "I think when it comes to the crux I belong to the liberal tradition more than to theirs."¹⁹ The reason Niebuhr felt this way, despite having made his career out of attacking the liberal Protestant tradition, was that when he engaged their writings or arguments he felt that they were "trying to fit life into a dogmatic mold" and that they "held fast to Biblical presuppositions" that he couldn't hold to (*ibid.*). Lastly, Niebuhr felt that "their indifference to and lack of understanding of political and social

¹⁹ (Niebuhr 1991, 22) (hereafter cited as *J&M*).

problems” always made them foreigners to him (ibid.). Niebuhr later repeated this sentiment, noting that when he found “neo-orthodoxy turning into sterile orthodoxy or a new Scholasticism,” he remembered that he was “liberal at heart” (ibid.). That said, Niebuhr rejected almost all of liberalism and for the most part, built his career on tearing it down.

Liberalism typically held that injustice was due to man’s ignorance and would yield to education and greater intelligence; that civilization was gradually progressing and becoming more moral; that the character of individuals is the solvent for injustice, not social systems or political arrangements; that appeals to love, justice and good-will would bound to be efficacious in the end and that any failure now was due to an inadequate amount of appeals made on their behalf; that goodness makes for happiness and that the increasing knowledge of this fact will eventually overcome selfish impulses; and finally, that wars are stupid and are caused by those who are more stupid than those who recognize the stupidity of war. In other words, the liberal credo was primarily a “faith in man”—whether Darwin’s or Hegel’s—and it was utterly optimistic about her future.

It was liberalism as “faith in man” and “soft utopianism” that Niebuhr rejected but he did hold fast to some liberal traditions, notably those rooted in the German theological tradition (ibid., 25). First, Niebuhr’s thought moved from human experience and historical consciousness into the knowledge of God, rather than the reverse (which was neo-orthodoxy’s preference). Secondly, Niebuhr held to an interpretation of Jesus that distinctively German, although many influential social gospelers like Troeltsch and Harnacks held it as well: a Jesus of “free personal piety” and heroic moral rigor, not a social reformer with a social program. The Kingdom of God, for Niebuhr, was not a social program at all, but rather it was “the vision of an ideal ethical and religions situation” where God’s

will controls history and the values of pure spirituality are appreciated and recognized ultimately (ibid). Since these two notions—Jesus’ piety and the Kingdom of God—only provided the rudiments of a social ethic, Niebuhr believed it was the church’s task to finish the formulation. In this sense then, it was liberalism’s view of religion as a power for social transformation and a source of energy for the social struggle that Niebuhr retained.

Additionally, Niebuhr shared political liberalism's model of society as a marketplace of competing interests and powers; Niebuhr's notion of justice was regulated by liberalism's principles—equality and liberty—and his social strategy was liberal as well—“justice is furthered by increasing the relative power of marginal groups” (ibid., 26). Finally, Niebuhr hated absolutism and was a pragmatist and pluralist who prized tolerance and social experimentation—classic liberal trademarks (ibid.).

However, Niebuhr rejected liberalism's skepticism about knowing ultimate meaning and ultimate values as well as liberalism's sentimentality, the idea that love and goodwill would harmonize social relations. It is in these last two rejections of liberalism that Niebuhr aligned himself with the neo-orthodox tradition’s use of classic Christian symbols and doctrines; yet, much liberalism can be found in how he uses these symbols and doctrines, as expressed in an important category for Niebuhr—that of “myth,” and his subsequent distinction between “primitive” and “permanent” myths. This is where Niebuhr’s liberalism—the legacy of 19th century liberalism—was affirmed; he continually sought to separate and sort the permanent from the primitive, the timeless truths from their relative trappings (ibid., 29).

Niebuhr’s thought, if it can be fairly categorized at all, is best understood as a unique brand of Christian Realism. Understandably, the qualifier “Christian” may cause the ears of

some readers to perk-up and subsequently, to turn off completely; however, the group “Atheists for Niebuhr” would probably advise against such out-of-hand dismissals. For one thing, much of Niebuhr’s religious faith can be understood—to use his own terms—as “reverent agnosticism.” Secondly, Niebuhr’s Christian faith was grounded in a nuanced and qualified understanding of the larger categories of “religion” and “mythology.” Let us unpack this second aspect of Niebuhr’s thought, so that we may better understand the role religion, specifically Christianity, plays in Niebuhr’s ethics of rhetoric.

There are two primary sources of human vitality, according to Niebuhr. The first is the natural will-to-live, what he calls the “animal impulse.” The second primary source of human vitality is “confidence in the meaningfulness of human existence.” The more complex the world gets, the more self-conscious man becomes, the more man recognizes the total forces of the universe in which he finds himself, then the more he will depend upon the second source to maintain a healthy sense of life. This confidence that life has meaning is not dependent upon a rational analysis of the multifarious forces and factors of existence; instead, it is something that is assumed in every healthy life. Though men may be unable to define the meaning of life, this does not keep them from living by a simple trust that it does have meaning. This simple trust, this basic optimism of all vital and wholesome life, Niebuhr called “primary religion.”²⁰

How the meaning of existence, the primary religious vitality, is revealed to different individuals, cultures, and generations will transform man’s primary religion into a more specific and qualified genre of religion. For instance, there are totemistic religions, primitive religions, tribal religions, superficial religions, and profound or “High” religions,

²⁰ (Niebuhr and Brown 1986) (hereafter cited as *ERN*).

just to name a few. In order to place a particular religion, say Christianity, Buddhism, Greek Mythology, or Marxism—yes, Marxism—one must simply ask, where is the focal point of that religion’s meaning of existence? How is life’s meaning revealed to its followers? Thus, if the meaning of existence is revealed in the relation of an individual to his group, as it was in primitive and tribal life, we have a primitive religion, regardless of the when and where that it manifests itself—and we may now note that this is precisely why Marxism qualifies as a primitive religion, according to Niebuhr. Importantly, when the meaning of life is achieved through its organic relation to a social enterprise the resulting loyalty will usually form a kind of totemism by giving a mythical and symbolic expression to the idea that the value and meaning of a social group are absolute. In other words, the transcendent elements of the primary religion will be placed in the realm of immanence, i.e. *now* in history and/or *here* on earth. Thus, nature-gods become identified with the gods of tribes and both tribe and nature become unified into a common center and source of meaning.

It follows then, that where people refuse to ask ultimate questions about the relationship between the values of their social group to the ultimate source of values we will find some sort of primitive religion. Typically, however, the natural order doesn’t follow prescribed rules of our or our god’s making. “The world is not only a cosmos but a chaos,” as Niebuhr puts it (*ERN*, 4). Thus, the simple and optimistic faith of primitive religion is threatened, as every system of meaning is always threatened, with meaninglessness; and furthermore, this meaninglessness typically results in a despairing pessimism on the part of the newly disillusioned faithful. Here, a theme emerges that will often repeat itself in Niebuhr’s analyses of various problems, which is that the facts of experience are stubborn things: they inevitably crash headlong into our simple

explanations, destroying our theories, and unless we are given grace, our individual wellbeing and/or our culture's vitality.

Enter "profound religions," the manifestation of which is always due to an effort to challenge the pessimism of disillusionment that is the residue of all primitive religions. It is profound religion's task to find a meaning in life that includes the totality of existence and interprets the chaos of life as only provisionally threatening, hopeful that perhaps it will eventually be brought under the source of meaning's dominion (ibid.). "The more men think the more they are tempted to pessimism," writes Niebuhr "because their thought surveys the worlds which lie beyond their little cosmos, and analyzes the chaos, death, destruction and misery which seem to deny their faith in the harmony and meaningfulness of history" (ibid.). In Niebuhr's analysis, the history of religions is the history of man's search for ultimate meaning, his subsequent oversimplification of his own relationship to that source of meaning, and lastly, the debunking of his theory about said relationship and his search for a new and more profound vocabulary, symbolic system, or mythology to replace it.

Having explored the theological conceptions of Niebuhr's thought, we can see that Niebuhr genuinely desired a "third way" to understand time and eternity, nature and destiny. This is what he meant by "profound," "High," "ultra-rational," and "supra-rational" myths, which prefer paradox to simplicity, and ambiguity to certainty. Instead of collapsing time and eternity, or separating the two completely, a dialectical theology combines both aspects of primitive myths paradoxically. The first two methods are rationally sound and logically coherent while the third is not; which is why the third way is a "deceptive" one.

Christianity's Dialectical Philosophy of History

A philosophy of history that can bring all of the various perspectives of economists, political strategists, insightful artists, and moralists, into a harmonious unity “must be endowed with the highest imagination” (*REE*, 122). Niebuhr argues that it must “combine the exact data of the scientist with the vision of the artist and must add religious depth to philosophical generalizations.” The solution, according to Niebuhr, the only adequate philosophy of history, is mythology. The first reason Niebuhr suggests that we turn to mythology concerns the role of subjectivity in historical analysis. Modern man, as Niebuhr found him, was so empirically rationalistic that he could not do justice to the history he was spectating. He was, in other words, inside of it, looking closely at the phenomenon of, say “railroads” or “radios,” and this caused him to miss out on the larger whole. Modern man couldn't see the forest because of the trees. He lacked a vision of the whole that would give meaning to the specific events he wanted to comprehend (*ibid.*, 122). “A vision of the whole is possible only if it is assumed that human history has meaning” Niebuhr argued; “and modern empiricism is afraid of that assumption” (*ibid.*, 122-3). This meaning was precisely what modern man needed and in order for history to feel meaningful, one had to start with a mythology. Of course, the modern empiricist, Niebuhr observed, didn't escape mythological interpretations of history simply because he tried to consciously avoid them. “He merely insures their inadequacy by leaving their presuppositions unexamined” (*ibid.*, 123). Thus, he translates the mood of optimism, prevalent in bourgeois circles, into a “mythology of progress.” But an adequate mythology, a sufficient philosophy of history,

must be able to account for, not only progress, but also find “meaning in momentary chaos” (ibid., 124).²¹

A consistent religion, Niebuhr writes, is as equally absurd as a consistent scientific empiricism. The latter is absurd because it tends to deny the continuities in reality and see everything only in its immediate and momentary situation. The former is absurd because it regards all reality—personality in particular—as *sub specie aeternitatis*, and thus it fails to see “how truly personality is the product of specific social and natural forces and neglects to change the material environment in the interest of human welfare.”²² (Niebuhr 1927, 183) Surveying the historical landscape in 1927, Niebuhr—by no means alone—argued that the latter worldview typified the Western perspective and that the former was typical of Eastern philosophies and religions.²³

The Western world Niebuhr argued, had much to learn from the East in its strategy of life, but there was nothing to gain by substituting one strategy for the other: both were defective. The current problems of the West, for Niebuhr, were the result of the “complete bankruptcy of religious forces and the unchallenged dominion of science” that permeated its culture, just as the plight of the East was due “to the unchallenged sway of religion” that held it back from achieving economic, technological and political gains (ibid., 184). As

²¹ Herein lies the necessity and power behind ideology. Since they cannot account for the chaos, they subsume it into their philosophy of history. It becomes “breaking eggs to make omelets,” as Hannah Arendt described Nazi ideology. Niebuhr was one of the first to understand this powerful dynamic in ideological myths. Writing in 1934, he argues, “Interpretations of history actually tend to verify themselves, when rigorously held, because they direct the course of history toward an imagined goal.”

²² Latin for “under the aspect of eternity”; hence, from Spinoza onwards, an honorific expression describing what is universally and eternally true, without any reference to or dependence upon the merely temporal portions of reality.

²³ (Niebuhr 1927, 183) (hereafter cited as *DCNR*).

Niebuhr poetically put it: “Neither the West nor the East has arrived at a perfect basis for happiness. The Oriental soul is like a bird, free of its cage, but with no wings to fly. The Occidental soul has wings but is so fascinated by its gilded cage that it does not care to fly” (ibid., 184-5). The situation, Niebuhr sums up, is this:

Human personality can be understood neither in terms of its environment alone nor in absolute terms which leave the material world in which it develops out of account. The final victory of personality must be gained by transcending concrete situations and material circumstances; but it is a hollow victory if circumstances are not previously used and amended to improve personal values. The soul is at once the victim and the master of the material world. It gains its highest triumph by renouncing the world, but the pronouncement is premature if a futile and yet not futile effort is not made to make the natural world conform to the needs of human character. (ibid.)

Niebuhr’s conclusions will most likely shock Orthodox religionists: the values of religion are conditioned and not absolute and they attain their highest usefulness not when they subdue all other values but when they are in perpetual conflict with them, or it may be truer to say when they are coordinated with them (ibid., 185). But coordination, Niebuhr argues, is not a simple accomplishment; yet, it is possible. The East could learn to live in time and the West could learn to view its temporalities with indifference. Man, Niebuhr argues, is a citizen of two worlds and thus, he “cannot afford to renounce his citizenship in either” (ibid., 186) In the end, we must work out our destiny both as a child of nature and as a servant of the absolute. He writes, “The only fruitful alternative to a monism and pantheism which identifies God and the world, the real and the ideal, is a dualism which maintains some kind of distinction between them and does not lose one in the other” (ibid., 194). Despite Niebuhr’s continual adjustments and movements along the wide political and theological spectrums, it was this solution that he would never abandon. It remained, from

the beginning to the end of his expansive career, the defining characteristic of his mythopoeic thought.

We should note however, as Niebuhr does, that mythopoeic dialectics are not new solutions to the riddles of life. Niebuhr points out that, “they are in fact as numerous as pantheistic ones, but their metaphysical limitations have usually outweighed their moral advantages and shortened their life” (ibid.). For instance, in Zoroastrianism the spirit of evil exist independently of the good spirit and this Persian dualism is found in both Hebrew and Christian thought. It is partly responsible for the satanology of the Old Testament and Augustine’s early Manichaeism is also a compound of both Persian and Christian faiths. Thus Niebuhr writes, “Mythology is filled with efforts to do justice to the conflicts which the world reveals as obviously as its unities, as for instance in the myth of Prometheus and Zeus” and “Even Plato, from whom most Western pantheism has been indirectly derived, held that God's perfect goodness was thwarted by the intractableness of the materials with which he worked” (ibid., 195).

The relationship between the temporal world and the eternal world, from the Christian perspective, is not strictly dualistic; it does not hold that the eternal world is separate and distinct from the temporal one. “Christianity does not believe that the natural, temporal and historical world is self-derived or self-explanatory” (ibid., 4). Rather, the Biblical perspective is that the ground and the fulfillment of existence, the Alpha and Omega, beginning and end, lie outside of existence itself “in an eternal and divine Will” (ibid.). It holds that the eternal is revealed and expressed in the temporal but not exhausted in it, that man is the creation of God’s will, that He is the reason for man’s existence. On the

other hand, just because man is not God, this does not mean that the finite world is “merely a corrupt emanation from the ideal and eternal one” (ibid.)

The logical absurdity of Christianity’s paradoxical dualism is obscene to the modern mind and thus, since the influx of Greek influence on Christian mythology, many attempts have been made to evade, veil, or eliminate the element of deception in Christianity’s truths. Expressing the relationship between time and eternity in rational and logical terms invariably leads, according to Niebuhr, to pantheism or a false supernaturalism. Pantheism results from a complete unification of God and world, granting meaning to everything that happens in the flux of time—God’s providence is found in the record crops last harvest, his judgment and wrath revealed in Hurricane Katrina’s path through New Orleans. But when God and the natural world are completely in harmony, what do we make of the completely inexplicable? For instance, how do we interpret the sudden death of an infant in her sleep, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., or the AIDS virus? From the pantheistic perspective man loses his ability to make sense of the world in a way that isn’t chaotic, that isn’t bound, as was Hellas, to the unpredictable and malicious manipulations of jealous Zeus or slighted Apollo—or worse, a simply bored Athena.

At the other end of the spectrum, a false supernaturalism emerges when the dialectic is completely severed between heaven and earth, God and man, transcendent and immanent, sacred and profane, leaving the temporal world without meaning or significance. Over-correction is a common and natural reaction to our many problems, as individuals and communities and this, of course, was the eventual reaction of the Greeks to the unpredictability of Mt. Olympus’s tenants. Hellas sought emancipation of man’s changeless reason from this world of change and disorder. The life of the mind—though only the

aristocratic philosopher's mind—was valued over all else and life's only meaning was found in the contemplation of the timeless forms of the eternal realm. Of course, it goes without saying that it is easier to dwell on love and beauty when one doesn't have to worry about getting all the wheat planted before the third phase of the moon, and for this reason, the eternal forms of supernaturalism aren't really available for contemplation outside the rank and file of the bourgeoisie.

Pantheism and false supernaturalism can be avoided by accepting the fact that there are certain truths in this world that can only be expressed mythically and in symbolic terms. In fact, what is remarkable about man's tendency to insist that Christian truths are actually lies because of their logical absurdity is that we are all hypocrites when it comes to other forms of symbolic expression. Painting was one of Niebuhr's favorite analogies for the relationship between permanently valid myths and rational truths. Artists are forced to use deceptive symbols because they are trying to portray two dimensions of space on a single dimension of canvas. Painting a picture that has depth and perspective requires an artist, not to paint angles not as they are, but as they appear to the eye when it looks into depth (ibid., 5). Parallel lines aren't drawn as parallel lines but are made to appear as if they converge on the horizon, for that is how they appear to the naked eye." "This necessity of picturing things as they seem and not as they are, in order to record on one dimension what they are in two dimensions," Niebuhr writes, "is a striking analogy, in the field of space, of the problem of religion in the sphere of time" (ibid., 5). Time is a succession of actual phenomenal events. Yet this succession is not time because time is experienced as *real* only when these successions are given meaningful relationships to one another. Since these meanings cannot come from within time itself, time can only be experienced as real

when processes that are outside time are used to explain it. Unfortunately, since we exist in time, we cannot express these processes, whatever they are, without viewing them through the lens of temporality. In other words, the temporal process is like the painter's flat canvas. "It is one dimension upon which two dimensions must be recorded. This can only be done, Niebuhr argues, with "symbols which deceive for the sake of truth" (ibid., 6).

"Great art" argued Niebuhr, faces the problem of the two dimensions of time and the two dimensions of space, at the same (ibid.). Elaborating on this analogy Niebuhr demonstrates that modern man typically accepts supra-rational truth in the realm of visual art. Niebuhr often calls attention to the difference between a photograph and the artistic portrait to make this point. The portrait artist is confronted with painting a "character," yet human personality, he notes, "is more than a succession of moods." Ever the Jamesian, Niebuhr notes that the moods of a moment, as we experience them in reality, are held together in the stream of consciousness by a unity of thought and feeling, which gives them a considerable degree of consistency. We may note that our experiences and diagnoses of bi-polar behaviors as "mood dis-orders," evidence Niebuhr's testimony. It is, in lay terms and from the observers' perspective, a person's rapid mood changes that are not in a perceivable successive "order" and thus, they are viewed as erratic and unpredictable.

The portrait then, is a deception. Unlike a photograph, it is not an exact, precise, scientific rendering of what one sees when they look at a person.²⁴ The artist problem is to portray a personality, an inner consistency of character, which transcends the gesture or expression of any one moment in time. What separates a good portrait from a bad one is

²⁴ Of course, we now know much more about photography than did Niebuhr at the time and we've problematized, deconstructed and demolished everything once commonly thought about the "realism" of photography. Nevertheless, for Niebuhr's purposes and his audience, the analogy works.

the ability to capture the subject's "essence," some timeless truth about the person, by *not* rendering as they appear to the normal eye. Artistic elements are added in order get at something beyond what is seen by the naked eye and transcend the moment in time. The character must be made into a "symbol of something beyond itself."²⁵ This is the reason, Niebuhr notes, that art and religion are much more closely related than science and religion—one of many Niebuhrian insights that brought him closer to his "arch-nemesis," John Dewey, than he was probably aware (*ibid.*). The fundamental tension between mystery and meaning, between deception and truth, is maintained in all profound, paradoxical, prophetic, "high" religious myths.

Niebuhr wanted to demonstrate the "necessary and valid contribution of myth to the biblical world view" (*BT*, x). However, Niebuhr points out that "The idea of a meaningful history does not, however, explain the actual content of that meaning." The content of the biblical mythology, according to Niebuhr, is that "the Christian view of history passes through the sense of the tragic to a hope and an assurance which is 'beyond tragedy.'" It is tragic because recognizes that evil is an inevitable concomitant of even man's most righteous and spiritual accomplishments and enterprises. It goes beyond tragedy because it does not regard evil as normative or inherent in existence but as finally under the dominion of a good God (*ibid.*, xi).

The Biblical God is mysterious and man cannot understand his ways; yet, He is a God of revelation. His purposes are revealed, though not clearly, in the significant events of history. The revelatory power of these events must be apprehended by faith and once apprehended, they prove to be more than particular events—they take on ultimate

²⁵ Thus, portraiture and caricature, both done by falsifying physiognomic details, can never be sharply distinguished from one another.

significance. This, according to Niebuhr, is “the scandal of particularity” (*einmaligkeit*) that is a necessary aspect of Biblical faith. This revelation is also an act of redemption because though God reveals his judgment in history, he also reveals his mercy in these disclosures. If the disclosure is apprehended in repentance and faith it leads to a reformation of life. But note that one cannot apprehend the revelation without repentance because only the contrite heart will seek out God’s mercy. In other words, according to the Biblical conception, one must have faith in the revealed God to experience his judgment, one must repent, and then one must come back to the revelation and will see it as a source of mercy and new life afterward.

Suppose that I’m a family in Hawaii when Pearl Harbor is bombed. Though I recognize that this is not an absolutely clear judgment of God, since I’m a person of faith I interpret this event as a revelation of God’s judgment in history. Let’s say I think, “God has allowed this to happen because we are an imperialist country.” I repent for being complacent in this imperialism and not doing more to speak out against it. My “reformation” takes place by way of joining a political advocacy group, say “Democrats for Social Justice” and I send them money every month. Looking back on the events of Pearl Harbor, I’m saddened but I’m also encouraged by my reformation that there is new life, grace, and mercy after the dark days of God’s judgment.

This example is particularly relevant for Niebuhr’s interpretation of the Biblical myth pertaining to the prophetic contribution to Israel’s mythos. The Bible tells us that Israel is specifically singled out from all other nations, it is chosen by God and given a special destiny; however, this specialness only results in more responsibility and *not* a divine guarantee of its security. “You only have I known of all the families of the earth,”

Amos declares on behalf of Yahweh; “therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities” (Amos 3:2). Prophetic universalism strongly differentiates between the will of Israel and the will of God. The Biblical God is not conceived of as “the projection or extension of a nation’s or individual’s ideals and purposes.”²⁶ Nor is His power coextensive with, or supplementary to, a nation's power. As Niebuhr notes, “Israel does not choose God. God chooses Israel.” This characteristic sets Israel apart from their historical neighbors and the surrounding Mesopotamian myths. Since Israel has no choice in this narrative, the Biblical mythos represents a radical break in the history of culture. “It is,” Niebuhr writes, “in a genuine sense, the beginning of revelation; for here a nation apprehends and is apprehended by the true God and not by a divine creature of its own contrivance” (ibid., 104). The proof that he is the one true God, Niebuhr concludes, is that he confronts the tribe of Israel not as an extension of their power but as its limit.

God’s choice of Israel “is regarded as an act of grace for which no reason can be given, other than God's own love (ibid.). This act of grace reveals the second unique aspect of the Biblical God, and that is, that He is not “a force of reason identical with the *Logos* that the human mind incarnates” (ibid.). It makes no sense why God would choose Israel and His ways are not our ways. Thus, God’s grace, given to Israel, completes the structure of His meaning beyond the limits of reason and intelligence, as well as beyond the realm of history. It is this idea of an ultimate source and end of life that transcends human capacities to comprehend it and human powers to manipulate it, that represents a radical break of Biblical faith from the idolatrous tendencies of every culture. Man and tribe worship a God that views them like he views “even the Ethiopians,” The Biblical God must be experienced

²⁶ (Niebuhr 1949, 102) (hereafter cited as *F&H*).

as “enemy” before he can be known as friend. Human desires, insofar as they usurp God’s, must be broken and redirected before man’s will and God’s will can be concurrent (ibid., 103).

In other words, the Biblical God reveals himself to us in history, making life *meaningful*; meanwhile, his revelation transcends the bounds of reason, making it *mysterious*. This God, Niebuhr writes, “is not made in any human image” and crafting such an image is strictly prohibited. He is *Deus Absconditus*. Isaiah tells us that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts and God’s ways are not our ways (55:8). In other words, Yahweh is radically *other*—the “nations are as a drop in a bucket” to him (Isaiah 40:15-17). Niebuhr argues that it is this radical otherness, the unfathomable *mystery* of God that outrages man’s reason. Yet, he notes, the worship of this God is “the basis for the first genuine conception of universal history; and it remains the basis for the only possible universalism which does not negate or unduly simplify the *meaning* of history in the process of universalizing it” (ibid., 103). Niebuhr finds a mythic paradox in this relationship between the mystery of God and the meaning of history. “Mystery does not annul meaning but enriches it” he argues; “It prevents the realm of meaning from being reduced too simply to rational intelligibility and thereby being given a false center of meaning in a relative or contingent historical force or end” (ibid.). Mystery, Niebuhr poetically put it over twenty years later, “is the shadowy realm of twilight where both coherence and incoherence are known or intimated, as well as the threshold of glory which gives light but does not reveal its nature.”²⁷ The very word “God,” he argues, represents both the unknowable ‘X’ of mystery and the fullness of ultimate meaning. This is a powerful paradox in Niebuhr’s

²⁷ (Niebuhr 1968, 5) (hereafter cited as *F&P*).

mythopoeic interpretation and it is central to understanding Niebuhr's thought as thoroughly dialectical in nature.

Of all of the traditions of mythic dualism Niebuhr obviously prefers the Judeo-Christian one. We find the reason for this preference in his analysis of the nature of Judaism's dualism. The first reason for this preference is that the Judaic dualism is dramatic and not philosophical. Niebuhr notes that early Judaism's naïve dualism is partly responsible for its potency in the history of religion. In the early Hebrew tradition God was conceived of as omnipotent, which led to its monotheism; but the idea of omnipotence was elaborated dramatically rather than philosophically. As Niebuhr notes, "The heavens might declare his glory and the firmament show his handiwork, but he was revealed in national history and (according to the conception of the later prophets) in personal experience more than in natural phenomena." In other words, in Judaism it is typically the still, small voice, rather than the earthquake or the fire that was the symbol of God's presence.

Prophetic Christianity continued this tradition, maintaining a tense dualism that results in its moral superiority over its mythic competitors²⁸. Jesus, like the Old Testament prophets, "emphasized the moral rather than the metaphysical attributes of God in such a way as to develop a practical and morally potent distinction between God and the universe, between the ideal of religious devotion and the disappointing realities of life" (ibid.). The practical dualism of Christianity, in its unspoiled form, is markedly different from Oriental monism in that Christianity has always been a religion seeking a metaphysics, whereas Buddhism is a metaphysics generating a religion (ibid.). The defect of the East's metaphysical system is precisely that it is a neat little system, which inevitably results in

²⁸ Niebuhr draws heavily on the writings of Albert Schweitzer and Alfred North Whitehead for his analysis of Jesus and Christianity.

oversimplifications of its view of the world. Thus, “in respect to its treatment of evil, Christianity is therefore less clear in its metaphysical ideas but more inclusive of the facts” of human existence.

The second reason Niebuhr finds Christian dialectics superior is the structure of their polytheistic and simultaneously monistic God. Jesus’ deification gave him dramatic and dynamic force within history. The “God of the ideal, the symbol of the redemptive force in life which is in conflict with evil” entered the world through Christ. Furthermore, since no clear distinctions exist between the Holy Ghost and the spirit of the living Christ, the doctrine of the trinity was in effect the ultimate symbolic dualism. The metaphysical inconsistency inherent in the idea of the trinity helps it retain its dualistic aspects from within a monistic orthodoxy. These symbols are ambiguous and it is precisely their lack of philosophical precision that gives dramatic and vivid force to the idea of a conflict between evil and the redemptive force and creative force in life (ibid., 199). Thus, Niebuhr writes, Christianity can fulfill “the two great functions of religion in prompting men to repent of their sins, and in encouraging them to hope for redemption from them” (ibid.).

However, even Niebuhr’s preference for dualisms isn’t without qualification. Notably, it is Christianity’s naïve, ambiguous and paradoxical dualism that characterizes it as unique. Absolute dualisms, either between God and the world, man and nature, spirit and matter, or good and evil, are neither realistically possible nor necessary. “What is important” writes Niebuhr, “is that justice be done to the fact that creative purpose meets resistance in the world and that the ideal which is implicit in every reality is also in conflict with it” (ibid., 200). Naïve religions like Judeo-Christianity avoid the rational need for consistency that results in the inevitable obscurity of some existential facts for the sake of

intellectual unity. This is how the Judeo-Christian tradition lost much of the moral power that its paradoxical theology armed it with. Instead, it disintegrated, on the one hand into the completely paradoxical perspectives of liberalism and mysticism, and on the other hand into the rational absurdity of orthodoxy and literalism. Niebuhr writes:

Religions grow out of real experience in which tragedy mingles with beauty and man learns that the moral values which dignify his life are embattled in his own soul and imperiled in the world. He is inclined neither to obscure the reality of the struggle nor to sacrifice the hope of victory until too much reflection persuades him to believe either that all partial evil is universal good or that destiny makes his struggle futile and his defeat inevitable. That is how morality dies with religion when ages become too sophisticated. (ibid.)

For Niebuhr, too much reflection, reason, systematic theology or logical consistency is a deathblow to a religion's moral fortitude. Thus, Niebuhr traces the denigration of Christianity's naïve dualism historically to its enculturation into Rome's Greece.

Christianity was forced, in order to win over the Graeco-Roman world, to make some intellectual concessions and incorporate Hellenic philosophies into its theology. Thus, the gospel was polluted with Neo-Platonism in order to make it more culturally palatable. Its naïve and dramatic conception of God's omnipotence was metaphysically elaborated and this systematization betrayed the early church into an essential pantheism. The fusion of Greek dialectics and the simplicities of the gospel culminated in Augustine (himself influenced heavily by the Neo-Platonist Plotinus), who turned the simple Christian epic into an elaborate theological system, in which God becomes the guarantee of the reality of the ideal and the cause of every concrete reality (ibid., 202). In the end, writes Niebuhr, "the logic of a system of ideas becomes the pattern of human action." Thus, regarding moral vigor, Augustine's systematization of Christianity did it in, because "if reality only thinly veils the ideal implicit in it, or if the implicit ideal is certain to become real in history, there

is no occasion for moral adventure and no reason for moral enthusiasm” (ibid., 202-3). Religion’s necessary involvement with metaphysics means it inevitably repeats this cycle between metaphysical monism and dialectical paradox because the realities of life testify to the truth of the paradox while the reason of man’s intellect testify to the falsity of the formulations of these experiences in mythical terms. In other words, religion will always be forced to choose between an adequate metaphysics and an adequate ethics and Niebuhr suggests that it is always better to have a metaphysics with some loose ends than a religion inimical to moral values (ibid., 214). What is needed, then as it is today, is a philosophy and a religion that 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” (ibid., 209).

Of course, there are objections to a naïve religious dualism and they come from both sides—those who prefer the monism of rational consistency and those who prefer the monism of pure religious values. Of the former, Niebuhr notes in passing that there are philosophically competent scientists and scientifically competent philosophers who continually arrive at conclusions that are “in closer accord with a naïve theism than the monism of absolute idealism” (ibid., 210-11). Aside from this fact however, Niebuhr also notes that there “is no more reason today to deny the reality of God” he continues, “than to explain every causal phenomenon in terms of his omnipotent will” because the truths of religions are empirically verified in experience (ibid., 210). The corrective naïve dualism, no matter how it is defined—mind/matter, thought/extension, force/inertia, God/devil—approximates the real facts of life. In a sense, Niebuhr notes as an aside, there is never a

single dualism but many of them. In a man's lifetime he may experience a conflict between his spirit and his flesh, his moral will and his natural desires, his cherished values and the caprices of nature. "It may be impossible to do full justice to the two types of facts by any set of symbols or definitions" argues Niebuhr, "but life gives the lie to any attempt by which one is explained completely in terms of the other." Thus, in response to the critics who subordinate all of the advantages of naïve theism to rational consistency, Niebuhr returns to his graduate work on William James by suggesting a pluralistic model that has both scientific and metaphysical virtues and which dignifies "personality." Though not in metaphysics, science and religion are completely compatible regarding experiences because both attest "to the reality and painfulness of the creative process in man and nature" (218). They may unite, Niebuhr notes, in persuading man that "if hopes are dupes, fear may be liars," and that he must "work out his salvation in fear and trembling" (ibid., 219).

The objection to a naïve dualism also comes from the other side of the aisle, from those who believe that it imperils religious values by robbing God of omnipotence and the universe of dependability. According to these critics, religious dualism doesn't guarantee the inevitable triumph of good over evil, of personal and spiritual values over the lower ones of materialism, commercialism, individualism, etc. Niebuhr's answer to this objection is that the moral virtues of dualism are derived precisely from this characteristic (ibid., 215). One cannot easily do battle with evil while guaranteeing victory at the same time. Thus, as religion dignifies personality it runs the risk of obscuring the defects in man's nature; by making the triumph of good over evil certain, it may prompt him to take "moral holidays"; if it emphasizes the harmonies of the universe it may make evil seem unreal.

Given the chance, Niebuhr knew that men prefer to extract comfort from religion and forget the challenge implied in their faith, i.e. "They will use religion to sublimate rather than to qualify their will to live. They will accept the assurance of faith that the frustrations of the natural world are not permanent, but they will not accept the challenge of faith to overcome the corruptions of nature in their own souls" (ibid., 216).

This tension between metaphysics and ethics, between certainty and paradox, is at the core of the religious function, symbolized by the perennial conflict between priest and prophet. The former's task is to dispense comfort and the latter's task is to make the challenge of religion potent. Thus, the priests always outnumber the prophets because in religion, as in all other fields, human selfishness is a major determining factor. Despite his inevitable victory over the prophet, the priest is indebted to her because her original experience is the reality that gives the priest's message its plausibility. The prophet guarantees the reality of God by making him real in experience, by defeating reality in the name of the ideal in history, thereby paving the way for the priest to declare the victory of the ideal. The priest's speculation and deduction contribute to religious faith only after the experiences of the prophet lay the foundation for their faith. Thus, there is no reason why the comforting assurance of religion should be done away with completely. It has as much right to preach hope as it does repentance. It must save man from despair as well as from pride and complacency.

These myths help us make sense out of three types of relationships. First, myths serve an ontological function. They help us understand and make sense out of the dialogue between the Self and the Self, the struggle between our personal Wills and Consciences ("that which I Will to do, yet do not do"). Secondly, myths serve a historical function. All

mythologies, according to Niebuhr, are in a sense, philosophies of history; they shed light on the relationship between our individuality and our loyalty to more inclusive communities; they place us into a dramatic framework that allows for the necessary tension between these two elements of existence, i.e. the paradox of patriotism. They help us answer the question, “what is God and what is Caesar’s?” Finally, myths serve a phenomenological or existential function. They help us understand man’s dialogue with God, every human being’s sense of some sort of relationship to the absolute and transcendent meaning of all life. They help us understand our desire for the “Good” and our longing for “Truth”. Though they give us a sense of meaning in each of these dialogues, if they are dialectical, paradoxical, and profound, they also come with a sense of awe and timeless mystery that, ideally, prevents us from abusing them by interpreting every one of life’s relationships through their transcendent lenses.

There are four Christian myths that are basic to the Biblical faith. They are, the Creation, the Fall, the Incarnation and the Final Judgment. The first two are Judaic in origin and the last two are Christ’s contributions to the Hebrew tradition. The latter cannot be understood without the former. Hart (1997) argues that there are four characteristic types of myths, each serving its own respective function. *Cosmological* myths explain where we came from, how we got here, and why we are here. *Societal* myths are pedagogical in that they instruct us on “the proper way to live.” *Identity* myths provide members of a community with a story that serves as the basis of their sense of who they are as a collective. Lastly, *Eschatological* myths help people know where they are going and tell them what lies ahead in the future. On the surface, each myth fits neatly into Hart’s four categories, but they are not isolated myths. For instance, though the myth of the Fall may

tell us that we are all sinners, giving us an identity, is also tells us how we are to live and is therefore societal.

Before looking at each myth in depth, one final note should be observed. Over the course of Niebuhr's long career the names he used for these myths seem to echo whatever he may have been reading or studying at a given time. So, for instance, "Original Sin," "The Fall" the "Tower of Babel" and "The Universality of Self-Concern" (which sounds like something Paul Tillich talked him into using) are all different names for the same permanent truth, expressed mythically. In each respective section I will try to catalog the names Niebuhr gives each of these myths and perhaps show, if there is sufficient reason, why certain names were given at certain times. Niebuhr is, after all, a pragmatist, firmly entrenched between the old schools of Dewey and James and the "new" schools of Rorty and Dickstein. As such, he often demonstrates a profound understanding of the power of vocabularies to change behaviors, alter attitudes, move individuals into solidarity with others, and energize collectives into unified action.

The Creation

"We are deceivers yet true, when we say that God created the world."

The biblical account of creation is well known. In the first chapter of Genesis it is recorded that over the course of six days God created the heavens and the earth; lit up the world with the sun, the moon and the stars; formed the earth, the sky and the oceans; breathed life into the fish of the sea, the animals of the land, the birds of the air; out molding him out of clay, He created Adam, the first man. On the seventh day, he looked at what he had created and, noting that it was "good," he rested. Due to that monumental

week over 3,000 years ago, college students in the American South have had to drive hours to find counties that sell alcohol on Sundays ever since.

Modern man doesn't do well with the Creation myth because it can't be fully rationalized. It offends scientists and philosophers alike, who tend to substitute idea of "causality" for creation. This is why the beginning of time, for Aristotle, began with a "first cause;" but as Niebuhr notes, a first cause doesn't have a living relationship with the events of nature and history. Thus, it cannot account for the emergence of novelty in every new event. Novelty, from this perspective is viewed as arbitrary; similar to those previously mentioned mood swings of the bi-polar or manic personality. Niebuhr argues that no new event in history is *completely* arbitrary; new events are always related in some way to previous ones. "But it is a great error to imagine that this relationship completely accounts for the new emergence," he writes, because each novelty is only one of an infinite number of possibilities (*BT*, 8). This is why, no matter how good man gets at tracing the past, he will always fail to predict the future with accuracy. Rational theories about causation, in other words, tend to obscure the arbitrary aspects of every new object, event, and even evolutionary species. "It is therefore true," Niebuhr writes, "to account for the meaningfulness of life in terms of the relation of every thing to a creative centre and source of meaning" (*ibid.*). Not only is the idea of Creation incapable of being fully rationalized, but the concepts that emerge from the idea can only be expressed in terms that outrage reason as well. For instance, involved in the idea of Creation is the concept of "making something out of nothing." This idea is "profoundly ultrarational," Niebuhr argues; "for human reason can deal only with the stuff of experience, and in experience the previous event and cause are seen, while the creative source of novelty is beyond experience" (*ibid.*, 9).

Since the idea of creation relates the ground of existence to existence itself, it is necessarily mythical, rather than rational (ibid.). Its irrational nature does not make it untrue or deceptive but it does make it “a temptation to deceptions,” according to Niebuhr. The reason for this is that “every mythical idea contains a primitive deception and a more ultimate one” (ibid.). The primitive deception comes in when we regard the original formulation of the myth as authoritative. For example, Christianity is always tempted to commit the error of Biblical literalism by insisting that the myth of Creation means that an actual man was formed out of an actual lump of clay in an actual creative act that took place over the course of six days. On the other hand, the more ultimate deception in the myth of Creation takes place when the Church extends the idea of a divine cause into the realm of all human activity, thereby confusing the scientific analysis of relationships with the mythic one. This is analogous to the intentional error of certain artists, who falsify the natural relations of objects to express their ultimate significance.

The myth of creation, Niebuhr argues, expresses more than just the dynamic and organic qualities in reality that cannot be stated rationally; it also expresses the paradoxical qualities of reality, which elude the canons of logic (*F&P*, 18). In what theologians would immediately recognize as an Augustinian notion, Niebuhr writes, “All life and existence in its concrete forms suggests not only sources but possibilities beyond itself. These possibilities must be implied in the source or they would not be true possibilities.” This conception, in which God is the ground and the ultimate fulfillment of existence, is by Niebuhr’s estimation the only ground of an effective ethic “because it alone harmonizes ethical and metaphysical interests, and gives us a picture of the world which is really a universe, but not so unqualifiedly a meaningful world as to obscure the fact of evil and the

possibility of a dynamic ethics.” In other words, it makes the world of appearances meaningful, but not ultimately meaningful.

The Fall

“We are deceivers, yet true, we say that man fell into evil.”

The story of man’s first sin is really a primitive myth about the origin and the nature of evil in human life. The story begins with God placing Adam and Eve, the first human beings, in the Garden of Eden—a perfect world here on earth. In this earthly paradise there is a Tree of Knowledge, which God instructs Adam not to eat from. A talking snake tempts Eve, who subsequently tempts Adam, to eat the fruit from the tree with the promise of knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve eat the fruit, realize they are naked, and are immediately ashamed. God reasons that with the knowledge of good and evil Adam and Eve may also be tempted to eat from the Tree of Life and become gods themselves. Thus, He banishes them from paradise forever, punishing all of mankind from that moment on with, among other painful life processes, mortality.

Is the most important aspect, the essential point of this myth, is that human evil arises from “the very freedom of reason with which man is endowed” (*BT*, 11). Man's sin is not the result of his unrestrained natural impulses; if it were, then animal life would be considered sinful. Instead, man's unrestrained freedom is the reason he sins; he uses his freedom to “throw the harmonies of nature out of joint.” Adam and Eve are not guilty of eating the forbidden fruit. In fact, the particular commandment is of no consequence. What they are guilty of, instead, is making themselves, rather than God, the center of existence. “This egoism is sin in its quintessential form,” argues Niebuhr (*ibid.*). It demonstrates that

evil is not due to a defect in man himself, and it is not normative; rather evil only comes about “because man has been endowed with a freedom not known in the rest of creation.”

Like the other Christian myths, the idea of the fall is also subject to interpretive errors. The first is that of taking the myth literally, of regarding the primitive myth of the garden, the apple and the serpent, as historically true. Less literally, but equally absurd, is giving into the temptation to regard the fall as a historical occurrence. “The fall is not historical,” writes Niebuhr “it does not take place in any concrete human act;” rather, “It is the presupposition of such acts” (ibid.). What Niebuhr means is that when the Fall is taken as a historical moment in time, it expresses the myth in actual action, and since an action is always historically related to previous actions, this error leads to a determinism that isn’t part of the permanent truth in the myth of the Fall. Our tendency to look at human behavior externally and not introspectively tempts us to present the myth of the Fall in terms of causation, which misses the truth in the myth.

Another powerful truth in this myth could be called the “perfection before free action.” Before Adam and Even acted out of their own freedom and will, the world was perfect. The Garden of Eden and paradise on Earth are symbols of a perfection in history that is an ideal possibility, which every man can comprehend but none can realize (ibid., 12). For example, we are able to imagine a perfectly disinterested justice but when we try to achieve it we continually fall short of the standard we conceive of (ibid.). Niebuhr sums this truth up maximally: “Self intrudes itself into every ideal, when thought gives place to action” (ibid., 13).

The Fall, Original Sin, is also a perfectly dialectical myth. Niebuhr argues that the myth of the Fall “solves the problem of evil upon an essentially monistic basis by making

human sin responsible for even the inadequacies of nature and attributing everything from weeds to mortality to the luckless error of the first man” (ibid., 196). In this conception, Niebuhr notes, “neither the goodness nor the omnipotence of God is abridged” because “the human conscience assumes responsibility for more than its share of human ills in order to save the reputation of divine virtue” (ibid.). However this monism is qualified by the “injection of the tempting serpent, an element which is precursory of the belief in the devil, and which the Jews inherited from Babylonia and Persia and which has fortunately qualified all monastic tendencies in Jewish and Christian orthodoxy until today” (Ibid.). Thus, the Fall fulfills both of Niebuhr’s requirements: it is a mythic narrative that is dramatic and dialectical.

Original Sin, more than any other single Christian doctrine, is the most reprehensible and disdained mythic narrative in the Bible. Niebuhr, despite being urged to give up the doctrine by notable theologians, philosophers and friends, many who agreed with Niebuhr’s overarching goal, insisted that the reason the doctrine was so disgusting for modern man was on the one hand, that it had been misunderstood and on the other hand, that if it were completely untrue modern man wouldn't find it so disgusting—rather, it would just ignore it altogether. The Original Sin, according to Niebuhr, was the most empirically verifiable doctrine in the entire Bible.

In his later years, and much like his pragmatist brethren, Niebuhr would wonder if you would have been more successful in his goal had he changed his vocabulary; suggesting that he would probably should have called Original Sin, “the universality of self-concern.” By this, Niebuhr simply meant that original sin could be defined as “the universal inclination of the self to be more concerned with itself than to be embarrassed by its undue

claims.” Though this tendency is a paradox, it is wrong to reduce it to an ontological fate and thus equate the Fall with Creation. In other words, it is not the survival impulse, but the tendency to “consider ourselves whenever we rise to survey the whole human situation” (*SDH*, 18). Niebuhr offers us some examples in order to show that its universality does not indicate its uniformity: a deserter in war, whose self-concern tempts him to evade the risk of war; or, the brave soldier who may, upon enlistment in the Army, anxiously speculate on the possibility of being promoted. The latter example demonstrates how a person may be thoroughly devoted to a cause, community, or creative relationship, and yet may, within the terms of that very devotion, express a more ultimate concern for his own prestige, power, or security (*ibid.*).

During his career however, Niebuhr found other ways to express the timeless truths in Christian myths without abandoning anything he wanted to preserve. He did this by searching out the recurrence of mythic and dramatic themes, not only in other passages in the Bible, but also in the literature of the culture. The Genesis account of the Fall is not the only mythic narrative in the Bible that expresses permanent truths about pride and the corruption of man’s freedom. Nor was the Bible the only source of permanent truths, thought is was the most profound source. Niebuhr often drew on diverse mythic narratives to demonstrate the same truths.

One notable myth Niebuhr used to demonstrate the truth of the Fall was the story of the Tower of Babel, found in the eleventh chapter of Genesis²⁹. “And the whole earth was of

²⁹ It is notable because it prompted a sermon on the subject, which prompted a collection of such essays, *Beyond Tragedy*, which in turn prompted Niebuhr’s most profound analysis of narrative and drama, *The Irony of American History*. In “The Tower of Babel,” as in most of the essays found in *Beyond Tragedy*, Niebuhr builds a mansion on the foundations Nietzsche laid down in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

one language and of one speech,” the myth begins. After journeying across the face of the earth, they settled down in a plain and started making bricks and mortar. Having done so, and I am sure feeling quite proud of such a marvelous feat, they said, “Go to, let us build a city, and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth.” God, looking down on them, knows what is coming—“now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do”—so he scatters the people abroad and “confounds” their language “that they may not understand one another’s speech.” Thus, the place is now called “Babel”...

Niebuhr begins his analysis of the myth by noting “The Tower of Babel myth belongs to the same category of mythical fantasies as the Promethean myth... they both picture God as being jealous of man’s ambitions, achievements and pretensions” (*SDH*, 27). Elsewhere, Niebuhr notes that the Christian and Greek views of tragedy are similar because they both agree, “guilt and creativity are inextricably interwoven” (*ibid.*, 165). Then, Niebuhr notes that once again, as was the case with the Creation and the Fall, the modern mind, which oscillates between “wooden-headed literalism” and “shallow rationalism,” finds no validity in the idea of a jealous God; the modern either doesn’t believe in God at all or believes in one that is so very kind it is really “grandmotherly” (*ibid.*, 28). For primitives, a jealous God was an expression of their fear of higher powers; but the idea of a jealous God, for Niebuhr, is a permanent expression of man’s valid sense of guilt in all of his earthly striving.

Niebuhr sums up this truth in a dialectical maxim: “Religion, declares the modern man, is consciousness of our highest social values. Nothing could be further from the truth. True religion is a profound uneasiness about our highest social values” (*ibid.*). This profound uneasiness, is no different in kind, than the shame which Adam and Eve felt upon

recognizing their nakedness; just as Adam and Eve are symbols of every individuals' struggle between creative action and defying God' limits, so too is "every civilization and every culture" "a tower of Babel" (ibid.). Niebuhr writes: "Man is mortal. That is his fate. Man pretends not to be mortal. That is his sin" (ibid., 29). He is a "creature of time and place" yet he is not *merely* a creature of time and place because "he touches on the fringes of the eternal." Thus, man is never content to be just an "American man, or Chinese man, or bourgeois man, or man of the twentieth century. He wants to be man" (ibid.). Nor is man ever content with his truth. "He seeks *the* truth." The result is always the same, as it was in the myth of Fall and in the Tower of Babel; man forgets that he is a creature, forgets that he is not God, and in making himself the center of the universe, he loses that very thing which he prided himself on.

In Niebuhr's conclusion, we can see hints of what is to come in our analysis of Niebuhr's rhetorical method. Though here, Niebuhr speaks only vaguely and broadly about "American man" and "Chinese man," when addressing ethical situations, Niebuhr would weave mythopoeic dialectics into a prophetic rhetorical form. Thus in 1952, drawing on this same myth, Niebuhr would prophetically write:

The builders of the Tower of Babel are scattered by a confusion of tongues because they sought to build a tower which would reach into the heavens. The possible destruction of a technical civilization, of which the "skyscraper" is a neat symbol, may become a modern analogue to the Tower of Babel. (*IAH*, 158)

The Incarnation

"We are deceivers, yet true, when we affirm that God became man to redeem the world from sin."

The Christmas story is perhaps the most well know myth in the Christian Bible. It begins with a young Hebrew girl named Mary, living in Roman occupied Galilee. An angel appears to her and announces that she will bear a son, despite having never “known” a man. His name, the angel tells her, will be Jesus and he will be the Son of God and will reign over Judah forever. Joseph, Mary’s husband, performs by any estimates the highest act of religious faith and loving trust that has ever been demonstrated; he believes her. Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ that Old Testament prophets foretold would come and establish a Messianic kingdom. He is born in a manger in a stable in Bethlehem. Shepherds in nearby fields are told of the birth of the messiah by angels as well and they journey to the stable to worship the Christ-child. Visions come to several parties that Jesus is indeed the Christ. After living a rather quiet life, at age thirty Jesus begins his earthly ministry. He heals the sick, he cast out demons, he polemicizes the religious leaders of the Jewish community, he preaches a message of love and forgiveness instead of rabbinic law, and finally, he claims that he has the authority to forgive man’s sins, himself. Thus, he is crucified on a cross for the crime of blasphemy. Three days later, he walks out of the grave, alive. He makes some appearances to his followers before ascending into the heavens, promising to return soon, to establish the Kingdom of God. This is a brief narrative of the life of Jesus. However, it is not the myth of Christ.

The mythic story of Christ is much shorter. The eternal God entered temporal history as a Christ. This Christ lived a perfect life of love, which had never been done before, and hasn’t been repeated since. He demonstrated that a human could live according to the law of love, which is the highest ideal of historical existence; yet, he also demonstrated that if one does, it inevitably ends on a cross, for perfection on earth ends in death. Thus, he

demonstrated that “in order to find oneself, one must lose oneself.” Knowing that man inevitably fails in his efforts to live accordingly, Christ bore the sins of everyone on the cross, atoning for their sin, granting them grace, forgiveness and mercy. Finally, he showed that the persecution of perfection on this earth is not permanent, because he snatched victory from defeat by rising from the grave. These two stories, told in these two ways, demonstrate the difference between a mythic narrative and a historical one. Niebuhr writes: “Compared to this Christ who died for men’s sins upon the cross, Jesus, the good man who tells all men to be good, is more solidly historical. But he is the bearer of no more than a pale truism” (*BT*, 21).

Conceptually speaking, the idea of eternity entering time is absurd and irrational. The theological dogmas which try to make it rational, describing in ornate detail the relationship between God the Father and God the Son, only prove just how absurd the idea is. It is impossible to claim that the eternal ground of existence has entered existence without sacrificing its eternal and unconditioned quality, “without outraging every canon of reason” (*ibid.*, 14). Other dogmas, such as “the two natures of Christ,” fare no better, for logically, a man cannot be “truly God” and “truly man” at the same time.

The Incarnation is the fundamental mythic drama in the “gospels”—translated literally as “good news.” When rhetorically embodied, the good news of the Incarnation is delivered through “kerygma”—translated literally as “to cry out or proclaim as a herald.” Most of the New Testament is a recording, not of Christ’s life, but of his apostles and their followers’ *kerygma*—most notably Peter and Paul—to the Greeks and Romans. Yet in all their kerygmatic proclamations to the Gentiles, no one surpassed, in my opinion, the poetic profundity of the John. The Johannine version of the Incarnation, written for the ultra-

rational Greeks, states: “In the beginning was the Logos... And the Logos was made flesh.” This beautiful passage demonstrates that the difficulty of the kerygma “was in transposing symbolic, dramatic statements into ontological ones” (*SDH*, 96). However, the truth in this myth has not been invalidated by the logical difficulty, though it does remain, “a stumbling block to the Jews (who expected a messianic “King”) and to the Gentiles (the rational Greeks), foolishness.” Commenting on John’s gospel, Niebuhr concludes, “The truth that the Word was made flesh outrages all the canons by which truth is usually judged. Yet it is the truth” (*BT*, 14).

After reading all twenty or more of Niebuhr’s books, the last line jumps out to me immediately. Rarely does Niebuhr make such plain and simple claims to truth. He may say that “the facts of experience verify the truth in it” or “the man on the street knows this is true, whether or not the expert-scientists recognize it”; but it isn’t often that Niebuhr just comes right out and says, “It is true.” The reason Niebuhr so boldly affirms this gospel truth, I speculate, is found in the next lines:

The whole character of the Christian religion is involved in that affirmation. It asserts that God’s word is relevant to human life. It declares that an event in history can be of such a character as to reveal the character of history itself; that without such a revelation the character of history cannot be known. It is not possible to arrive at an understanding of the meaning of life and history without such a revelation. (*BT*, 14)

One can’t induce a conclusion about the ultimate meaning of life from empirical facts without presupposing a canon and criterion of meaning. The Incarnation—all biographical jokes about “Atheists for Niebuhr” aside—is the most important truth in Niebuhr’s thought, and it is there—always implicitly, though usually explicitly—in everything he writes.

In *Faith and History*, Niebuhr sums up the symbol's meaning this way. The climax of the Biblical drama, whose theme is the divine sovereignty of God over history, is "the self-disclosure of a divine love" (125). On the one hand, Christ overcomes the evil inclination to self-worship in the human heart, and on the other hand, Christ takes the evil of human history upon himself. These two facets of the divine love, Niebuhr argues, establish the two most important points in the biblical interpretation of history:

On the one hand there is a possibility of the renewal of life and the destruction of evil, whenever men and nations see themselves as truly under the divine judgment, which is as merciful as it is terrible. On the other hand the life of each individual as well as the total human enterprise remains in contradiction to God; and the final resolution of this contradiction is by God's mercy. (ibid.)

On the one hand then, human history is a story about new beginnings; not like those of naturalistic philosophies that view springtime as a new beginning, however—life doesn't arise from the winter's death. The new beginnings come instead from contrition. On the other hand, however, no amount of rebirth in history will ever reconcile the inevitable conflicts between the human will and God's will. Thus, a last judgment awaits the end of history in order to finally reconcile the two incoherencies.

In a way, the Incarnation is a complementary symbol to the Creation myth because in a sense it is the extension of the revelatory aspect of Judaic-Christianity. The Christian God who created this world also reveals himself in this world. When He created the world he gave man a *general* revelation, which points to the reality of His existence but not to His particular attributes. But a mythology that only contains general revelations is inevitably pantheistic because, as Niebuhr points out, "a God who is merely the object of human knowledge and not a subject who communicates with man by His own initiative is something less than a God" (*BT*, 15). The knowledge of God that comes only from a study of

the world is flat, just as the knowledge of a human being that comes from such a behavioristic study is flat. Personality can't be found in general revelations, in the observation of behavior, in the inartistic photograph, or the mere "facts." They are important clues and are helpful guides for understanding the past, and to a much less degree, predicting the future. But "the depth of freedom in every personality" can only communicate itself truly "in its own word" (ibid., 16). "Without such a word" Niebuhr argues, "the picture of any personality would be flat, as the interpretations of the divine which eliminate revelation are flat."

The Incarnation adds the element of *special* revelation to the Hebrew mythology, giving God a personality in history, putting him into a dialogic conversation with man. In Christianity, Christ is both "the second Adam" who restores the perfection of what was supposed to be when the first Adam was created; and "the Son of God, who transcends all the possibilities of human life" (ibid.). Christ expresses both the infinite possibilities of love in history and the infinite possibilities beyond human life, and thus, he reveals the total situation in which all human life stands (ibid.). Again, one may deceive oneself by insisting on the absolutely absurd and primitive idea of a Virgin Birth; or one may deceive oneself by rationalizing the myth and making it into a philosophical creed; but both deceptions will not destroy the truth in the Incarnation.

I wish to pause for a moment and note a place of conceptual overlap between Niebuhr and another ethicist, Mikhail Bakhtin. Niebuhr is an ethicist who draws on art and myth; Mikhail Bakhtin was also concerned with making art ethical. So it is interesting that Bakhtin lands upon the Incarnation concept without the explicitly Christian or religious tones. In his search for an ethical and dialogic form of art, Bakhtin coined the phrase "live-

entering. "In the process of live-entering, "one simultaneously renounces and exploits one's surplus; one brings into interaction both perspectives simultaneously and creates an 'architectonics' of vision reducible to neither. This architectonics produces new understanding" (Morson and Emerson 1990, 54) Bakhtin's later called this process "creative understanding."

Like empathy, creative understanding happens when one enters into the lived experience of another while not renouncing one's own position outside the other in time, space, and culture. This outsideness creates the potential for dialogue, which helps us understand culture in a profound way. The myth of a human Christ, particularly a "suffering" God," I argue, is a model for this creative understanding and this is what Niebuhr is getting at. By experiencing earthly life, the divine participates in a dialogue with man in a way that reveals the true limits to man's freedom, the true potential for his creative and divinely inspired enterprises, the true ideal for all human life with others. This type of dialogue, "educates each side about itself and about the other, and it not only discovers but activates potentials" that are "realizable only through future activity and dialogue" (ibid.) However, just because the future becomes "open" and "free" and "unfinalizable," to use Bakhtin's terms, does not mean Redemption is inevitable.

The Incarnation contains a cross and a crucifixion, as well as a manger and a resurrection. This is what is commonly called the Atonement. Niebuhr notes that the atonement is perhaps the most difficult myth to grasp without fully surrendering rational analysis. According to Niebuhr, no theories about the atonement are nearly as satisfying as the simple statements of Christ's death in the gospels. He writes, "This may mean that faith is able to sense and appropriate an ultimate truth too deep for human reason" (*BT*, 18).

Drawing on Paul's analysis of the gospel message for the Greeks, Niebuhr notes, "This is the foolishness of God which is wiser than the wisdom of men" (ibid.). Wise women have long since pointed out the absurdity of the atonement. Ethical women have long since pointed out that the message is more than absurd; it is immoral. By the standards of logic and reason, the wise and ethical women are correct. But notably, Niebuhr argues that these standards are not the real reason that modern woman rejects the idea of the atonement.

Modern man rejects the atonement because he does not regard life as tragic. Modern man believes in progress, that history is the record of a triumphant victory for good and the slow demise of its enemy, evil. Modern man doesn't recognize the simple truth that life always remains self-contradictory in its sin, no matter how high human intelligence and culture rises. Their view of the world is essentially non-tragic, romantic, built on delusion. However, recognition of the fact alone is not a solution. Recognizing that man is sinful results in a tragic perspective of human life. This is where the Christian faith has a new message for man, and that message is beyond tragedy—there is hope in tragedy. It is true that Christ "came unto his own and they received him not"; that Christ demonstrated a perfect love to his own people and they killed him for it. That is a tragic message. But it is also true, Niebuhr notes, that when that fact is understood and the norm of life is recognized as no longer sin but love, i.e. the new reality revealed in Christ, even if one fails to measure up, the spirit of contrition and repentance opens the eyes of faith. It is "the Godly sorrow that worketh repentance" (ibid., 19). "Out of this despair" Niebuhr notes, "hope is born."

"The hope is simply this" Niebuhr writes: that the contradictions of life, which man can't surmount, "swallowed up in the life of God Himself" (ibid.). This God is a creator *and* a

redeemer. He will not allow life to end tragically, for he snatches victory out of defeat, just as he did on the cross when he was defeated in history but was ultimately victorious in that defeat. 2,000 years ago he embodied love perfectly and was killed for it; and 2,000 years later, those who refuse his judgment, evade his redemption, and reject him as absurd foolishness are still trying to kill him in culture. Even in death, they must continue to kill him. They still mark their calendars from the day he was born, they still fight to keep his influence out of government affairs, they are still confronted with daily reminders of the cross they placed him on—gently dangling on the napes of lovers' necks, overshadowing the scenes of Renaissance paintings in modern museums, crashing through the chorus of classical symphonies, and signaling the triumphant march from Selma to Washington in the name of justice, freedom and equality. Not only in events, processes and symbols but also in life, they still kill him, for it is him they kill when they kill his embodiments: Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Bobby Kennedy, John Lennon.

Niebuhr echoes these insights when he notes the difference between the Greek heroes and Christ. The Greek heroes, aristocratic warriors, tragically beg for pity: "Weep for me!" they plead. But Christ on the cross, the suffering son of a carpenter and God, says, "Weep not for me, but for yourselves." "If there are tears for this man on the cross they cannot be tears of 'pity and terror'," as they are in Greek tragedies (*ibid.*, 168). "The cross does not reveal life at cross purposes with itself," Niebuhr notes; but on the contrary, "it declares that what seems to be an inherent defect in life itself is really a contingent defect in the soul of each man, the defect of the sin which he commits in his freedom. If he can realize that fact, if he can weep for himself, if he can repent, he can also be saved" by hope and faith and our "tears of self-pity" (*ibid.*).

Thus, we are deceivers yet we are honest, when we look for the permanent truth in this timeless occurrence, when Aeschylus's judgment that "wisdom comes from the awful grace of God" keeps us from rioting in Indianapolis; yet even more truth lay in our deceptions when we declare that Aeschylus was only a man, that his theodicy was as much a guess as ours, and that we need not guess at all because God has entered into history and revealed the true nature of our suffering. We do not suffer randomly, normatively, because we have not honored our parents, or because it is God's preferred pedagogy; we suffer because we love ourselves more than others, we misuse our freedom, we substitute Will-power for our Will-to-Power, we don't acknowledge that our existence is tragic, and that the law of love is the law of life. Christ entered the world to suffer for man and save him from sin tragically. He does this, not by his power, but he suffers, being powerless, from the injustices of the powerful (ibid.). He suffers the worst from the sins of the "righteous" who do not understand how full of unrighteousness is all human righteousness." "The Savior of the world" writes Niebuhr, "is not crucified by criminals or obviously evil people; he is crucified by the 'princes of this world'" (ibid., 182). Our failure to see this tragedy ensures us that life will remain tragic anytime the strong destroy the weak, when our system of justice fails to fulfill its promises, when the best we have and the best that we are isn't, in the last analysis, enough. The Civil Rights movement was a display of the best American democracy has to offer; yet it ended with the death of the powerless at the hands of the powerful. It is an apt display of this tragic feeling whenever we are enraged at sexual violence committed against an innocent child, when the best and most pure in all of existence is taken advantage of and exploited, and we ask ourselves "What kind of world do we live in?" If we have to ask, if this type of brutal violence and horrendous act comes as a

shock to us, then we have refused to see the world for what it is. For only if we first accept a view of the world as tragic can we, in humble contrition, live tomorrow with hope and grace and get beyond tragedy.

The atonement of Christ, Niebuhr writes, is a revelation of what life actually is. It is tragic from the standpoint of human striving, which can do no better than the Roman law or the Hebraic religion—both the best of their kind, yet both the reasons that the perfect Christ was crucified (ibid., 20). Yet, this crucifixion reveals in human history that which transcends human striving. This revelation helps us apprehend those elements of life that are beyond tragedy. “Without the cross” argues Niebuhr “men are beguiled by what is good in human existence into a false optimism and by what is tragic into despair.” This truth can’t be stated without deceptions but without them they are less profound. “Pure goodness without power,” Niebuhr writes, “cannot maintain itself in the world. It ends on the cross. Yet that is not where it finally ends. The Messiah will finally transmute the whole world order” (ibid., 177-8).

The Kingdom of God

“We are deceivers, yet true, when we declare that Christ will come again at the last judgment, that he who was defeated in history will ultimately triumph over it, will become its judge and the author of its new life.”

The myth of the second coming can be briefly summarized as follows: Christ, upon ascending to the right hand of the throne of his Father, God, promised to return and establish his eternal reign. When he returns, as it is said in the Catholic and Methodist creeds of faith, he will judge the quick and the dead. The dead in Christ will rise and will reign with Him. Commonly, there is a Hell somewhere in this story, though it is notably

absent from the messages of Christ and where it is present in other New Testament scholars it is more often about the present age and “the age to come.” Niebuhr notes that no biblical myth has led to more deceptions and illusions than this one. The imagery in the apocalyptic literature is often so extravagant and fanatical that the even moderately liberal side of Christianity has been ashamed by its appropriation and exploitation by sectarian fanatics, and for the most part they have been content with leaving it alone entirely (*BT*, 21). It is a large ranging myth and for our purposes can be broken down into three elements: the second coming and final judgment, the fulfillment of life through the resurrection of the body, and the fulfillment of history through the founding of a Kingdom of God. The final judgment comes at the end of history. Niebuhr is quick to point out that Christ’s ultimate judgments are at the end of history as opposed to in it. There may be moments of divine judgment in history but we should tread very carefully in pronouncing those judgments in his name, as if we know his will absolutely. The best way to keep from making this mistake is to pronounce the judgments on ourselves first, noting the log in our own eye, pointing out the speck in our neighbor’s.

The resurrection of the body is the second aspect of this myth. This idea, Niebuhr notes, “can of course not be literally true” just as no other idea of fulfillment can be literally true (*BT*, 290). All ideas of fulfillment use symbols from our present reality to describe and conceptualize a completion of life that transcends our present reality. We will go into Niebuhr’s ontology more in the second chapter; but for now, it is important to note that Niebuhr prefers this myth because it keeps the body and the soul intact. Niebuhr rejected Cartesian and Greek dualisms and insisted that there was no more reason to think the soul could exist without a body, as there was to think a body could exist without a soul. Both

were inconceivable because “reason can only deal with the stuff of experience” and no man has yet to experience a discarnate soul or an immortal body. Here, yet again, we see Niebuhr insisting on a Jamesian radical empiricism: “But we do have an experience of a human existence which is involved in the processes of nature and yet transcends them” (ibid., 291). Over and over again, throughout his career, Niebuhr insisted that “The facts of human experience point to the organic unity of the body and soul” (ibid., 292). This is the first reason that Niebuhr prefers the myth of the resurrection of the body.

The second reason is ethical: the “hope of resurrection of the body” he notes, “is preferable to the idea of the immortality of the soul because it expresses at once a more individual and a more social idea of human existence” (ibid., 297). Those myths that emphasize the immortality of the soul and their respective ideals tend to be highly individualistic, perhaps even ascetic. They interpret fulfillment in a way that makes it achievable without any reference to the social process. To combat this idea, Niebuhr emphasizes that the myth of the resurrection of the body grew out of a Hebraic social hope for a Messianic kingdom. Fulfillment for the Hebrews was a fulfillment of the social process. Thus, in combat to the individualistic elements of Christianity that highlighted “eternal life” as the ideal end of history, Niebuhr notes that Marxian ideas were a consequential and perhaps even necessary revolt. They set up a Kingdom of God minus the resurrection, minus the divine transformation of human existence, and whatever the errors in the utopianism, Niebuhr appreciated their restoration of an important element in prophetic religion. That element is the social one: that every life may be significant and transcend the social process, but its significance cannot be developed without reference to the social process as well (ibid., 299). The body, Niebuhr notes, is the mark of individuality as well as

of sociality (ibid., 301) Once again then, in the final analysis, the resurrection is another mythic element that confirms the dialectical nature of time and eternity in a paradoxical tension that Niebuhr finds ethically constructive.

The Kingdom of God lies beyond history but is not a realm of eternity that negates time (ibid., 192). “It is a realm of eternity which fulfills time,” Niebuhr writes. It is a symbol of the eternal in time. In a similar dialectical vein, the fulfillment of history by the foundation of the Kingdom of God distinguishes Christianity from naturalistic utopianism and Hellenistic otherworldliness (ibid., 22-3). Unlike those, Christianity’s hope of the fulfillment of life is expressed paradoxically and dialectically; it holds fast to its conception of the relation to time and eternity that is demonstrated in its other mythic symbols. History, as it was for the Greeks, is not held to be meaningless; the Christian myth doesn’t place fulfillment above history, in some realm of pure form and abstracted existence, but at the end of history. On the other hand, the end of history is not a point in history. Thus the Christian eschatology symbolizes that “fulfillment both transcends and is relevant to historical forms” (ibid.). Any hope to achieve an ultimate fulfillment in history is in vain because in the realm of history man has freedom and, recalling the prior myths, where man has freedom there will also be the misuse of that freedom, i.e. sin. So ultimate fulfillment must come outside of man’s historical possibilities. Christ, according to the biblical mythos, is the judge of the world and author of its ultimate fulfillment—the symbol “of what man ought to be and of what God is beyond man” (ibid.).

To briefly summarize Niebuhr’s eschatology: “The apocalypse is a mythical expression of the impossible possibility under which all human life stands,” writes Niebuhr (*ICE*, 36). Thus, the Kingdom of God is always here whenever the impossibilities are felt as

really possible and lead to new actualities in history. Nevertheless, he continues, every actuality always reveals itself in history, after the event, as only an approximation of the ideal. Thus, the Kingdom of God is not here. “It is in fact always coming but never here” (ibid.).

Conclusion

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; On the third day he rose again, He ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father, and He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

—The Apostle’s Creed, *United Methodist Church version*

Though hard numbers are hard to find, it is fair to guesstimate that this creed is spoken, in unison, in the congregations of thousands of churches holding millions of parishioners, every Sunday morning. In Latin, the creed was called “*Symbolum Apostolorum*”—the symbol of the apostles. I myself repeat it every week, and despite my disbelief that Jesus was born of a virgin, and my sometimes embarrassment at other historical and rational flaws in the message, I repeat it nevertheless. I do it because there are timeless truths in its message that I think are worth preserving, much as Niebuhr did.

It was 1916. In one of his earliest journal entries, Niebuhr reflects on his first experience with serving communion at a sick bed. He writes, “I think there is a good deal of superstition connected with the rite... Yet I will not be too critical. If the rite suggests and

expresses the emotion of honest contrition it is more than superstition.”³⁰ In 1920, Niebuhr would continue this strain of thought in another entry: “Religion is poetry. The truth in the poetry is vivified by adequate poetic symbols and is therefore more convincing than the poor prose with which the average preacher must attempt to grasp the ineffable... Yet one must not forget that the truth is not only vivified but also corrupted by the poetic symbol, for it is only one step from a vivid symbol to the touch of magic” (ibid., 30). Niebuhr’s argument is that the energies of life are not rational and that, though reason may guide them, it cannot create them. He writes, “The adjustment of man to his universe, toward which he must maintain an attitude of both filial piety and heroic rebellion, involves too many paradoxes to be expressed in terms of pure rationality” (*F&P*, 69).

Thus, men come to terms with the universe only by “heroic and poetic insights” and he is spurred to courage in undertaking the world of appearances, “only as he gains sufficient self-respect in his moral relationships to his fellow men to feel that the human spirit must be taken into account when the effort is made to penetrate the ultimate mysteries.” Religion, Niebuhr would define eventually as the “whole of man adjusting himself to the whole of life,” and he insisted that this could only be done in accord with two elements—“poetic insight and moral vigor” (ibid.). The task of creating these, Niebuhr insisted, was the prophet-technician’s, who knew how to insist that “man cannot be whole until he lives again in organic unity with his fellow men” and that “All civilization is a peril to brotherhood” (ibid., 71). In this way, the prophet’s task was to preach the Christian ideal to a fallen world; to demand that the mythic insights of poetic and permanent truth stand above the actualities of mere approximations of justice and love.

³⁰ (Niebuhr 1980, 13) (hereafter cited as *Leaves*).

Yet, as Niebuhr counters, “it is idle to protest against the inevitable in the name of an ideal.” Therefore, the modern prophet must also be a technician, “who knows how to transmute realities in terms of his ideal;” a “pedagogical technician” who knows how to create the kind of social and spiritual imagination that is necessary to overcome the mechanical and indirect relationships which modern life produces. They must help man to feel with and for his brother in such an alienated state of existence. He must be a “social technician” who knows how to create social organisms that can control the mechanical world. But they must be more than mere engineers. Intelligence may help solve the problems which intelligence has created, but it will need more than that; it will need to create a moral energy and a social intelligence in equal proportions (ibid., 72). Mythic and poetic insights create moral vigor and ardor. The following chapter will focus on the role intelligence plays in prophetic inquiry, i.e. to the dialectics of prophetic truth.

Chapter 3 Dialectical Inquiry: Love, Justice, and the Search for Truth

Man has always been his most vexing problem. How shall he think of himself?

—R. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*

If you gloss over Niebuhr's existential question you will miss something profound. Wouldn't it make more sense to ask *what* should man think of himself, instead of *how*; focusing on the content of the thoughts instead of their method? "Every affirmation that man makes about his place in the world" argues Niebuhr, ends in some contradiction. Yet again, we may ask, is it the content of the affirmation that results in the contradictions or is the method, i.e. the action of *affirming* itself that is causing the problems? Man's affirmations, the propositions man makes about himself, fall under the realm of dialectics. In fact, Niebuhr is correct in his assertion that the vexing problem is found in the *how*. Man may think of himself mythically and never run into contradictions; yet, when he thinks of himself dialectically, ergo conceptually, he inevitably reaches a logical impasse, as the history of the many affirmations man has made about himself will show.

The "vexing problem" of Being has been through the language cipher; defined essentially as a *logistikon* and/or a *daimon*; defined in dramatic action as *bios politikos*, *animal laborans*, and a *cogito ergo sum*; defined dialectically as its opposite—*nothing*—before being isolated, alienated, and finally, authenticated as *Dasein*—a phenomena in opposition to the *they* of the world—*mitsein*—and itself—*Dasein*. Man's problem with himself has been summed up in its sensation and feelings: despair, angst, anxiety, fear and trembling, doubt, thought, absurdity, ambiguity, and to those who don't ask at all, ambivalence. The questions man asks, in order to get at, around, or behind his existential

uncertainty, are varied: “Why is there Being, rather than Non-Being?” “Why doesn’t man kill himself?” “Why doesn’t man kill every other man?” and “When man asks about himself, why and what, is he asking, exactly?” Lately, it is fashionable to *turn* and *reify* and *deify* man’s vexation with himself: he’s been turned “upside down,” turned “linguistically,” turned into an animal, and taken a turn for the worse; he’s been rephrased, reorganized, re-dialecticized, re-analyzed, restricted, and regurgitated; finally, he’s been demythologized, demystified, denationalized, and deconstructed—if you are fortunate enough to be around certain folks, you may have even come across man’s (Re)turning or his (De)(Re)construction! If the history of thought tells us anything, it is the affirmation that, at least for those privileged few who have the resources, education, freedom and health to live a *vita contemplativa*, Niebuhr’s estimate of man’s situation is correct.

The problem with man’s vexing problem with himself is, if I may offer one more analysis of the human condition, that man—literate man anyway—usually tries to solve the problem dialectically, i.e. categorically. According to Niebuhr, “Every affirmation which he may make about his stature, virtue, or place in the cosmos becomes involved in contradictions when fully analyzed. The analysis reveals some presupposition or implication which seems to deny what the proposition intended to affirm.”³¹ For this reason, any investigation into the nature of man, that insists on logical coherency, which indeed is the standard of measurement for dialectics, will inevitably end in rational absurdity.

The reason for this inevitable absurdity is that man is both a creature and a creator of history; he has both vitality and form. If we insist that man is an animal, that he is merely

³¹ (Niebuhr 1996) (hereafter cited as *NDMI* or *NDMI*).

one natural species in a vast number of such species, which he obviously is, and that he ought not to pretend to be any more than that, we must at least tacitly admit that he is “at any rate, a curious kind of animal who has both the inclination and the capacity to make such pretensions” (ibid.) On other hand, if we insist that man is unique and holds a special place in the natural world, pointing to his rational faculties as proof of his distinctive place, “there is an anxious note” in such avowals of uniqueness, which betray our “unconscious sense of kinship with the brutes” (ibid.) Furthermore, man’s very effort to estimate the value of his reason implies some degree of transcendence over his rational capacities; for the man who estimates the value of his “reason” must be more than “reason,” since he has the capacity to transcend his ability to form general concepts. “The obvious fact,” writes Niebuhr, is that man is both a child of nature and a spirit who stands outside of nature; he is both a creature of the natural order and a creator who, by taking thought, can make himself and his thoughts his own object; he is involved in the “forms of nature” on the one hand, and on the other hand he is free of them—he has “vitality” (ibid.)

Obvious complexities and vexing problems result from man’s vitality and thus, any attempt to understand *man* by fitting him into a completely coherent and rational order inevitably ends in absurdity—for reason and logic, by their very nature, cannot account for the new and contingent in life, when man’s creativity disrupts the order of a rational worldview. For this reason, man’s nature and his destiny, the meaning of life and history, must be viewed incoherently, if certain existential truths are not to be missed. This is the realm of ultimate systems of meaning, of myths, religions, ideologies, metaphysics, and philosophies.

Nevertheless, man's rational capacities for abstract concepts may add to his understanding of certain universal truths. Niebuhr, echoing Peirce and James, argues that reality is characterized by a basic coherence; "things and events are in a vast web of relationships and are known through their relations" (*CRPP*, 218). Our knowledge of appearances is possible only through conceptual images, "which in some sense," Niebuhr continues, "conform to the structures in which reality is organized." Our impulse to understand the world naturally expresses itself in metaphysics; we rise above physics to penetrate behind and above the forms and structures of things to the form and structure of being *per se*.

As long as we remember that ultimately, we "see through a glass darkly," and don't insist on making every conceptual analysis part of a systematic and coherent "ology," there are certain truths which can be gotten closer to by way rational analysis. For centuries, argues Niebuhr, "we've been subjected to a conflict between a theology which has become a bad science, and a science which implied an unconscious theology, a theology of unconscious presuppositions about the ultimate meaning of life" (*ERN*, 89). There is room then for dialectical inquiry in Niebuhr's thought; it is the method for investigating conceptual images of the perceptual world and is valuable, if it doesn't insist on systematic coherency. In fact, there is more than just "some room;" one could build a mansion full of them. Niebuhr's dialectical investigations into the nature of love & justice, creator & creature, power & grace, and many other variants of these conceptual schemes, make up a substantial portion of his writings. Niebuhr was just as at home when elaborating on abstractions, ideas, and concepts, as he was when he exploring the permanent truths in mythic narratives or when he was writing a polemic against Henry Ford for the *Atlantic*.

Eubanks notes, in agreement with both D.R. Davies and June Bingham, that Niebuhr was “a supremely dialectical thinker, desirous of understanding and explaining the world in a rationally coherent manner but not afraid of admitting ignorance in the midst of the irrational, nor uneasy about paradox.” Indeed, Eubanks continues, “Niebuhr agreed with his friend Paul Tillich that “reality is dialectical.” It is this aspect of Niebuhr’s work, “the supremely dialectical quality of his thought” that we will undertake in this chapter, on our way to understanding how myth and dialectic collide into Niebuhr’s Christian ethics of rhetoric. Niebuhr approaches the “laws,” “norms,” “universals,” and “inevitable appearances” both mythically and dialectically. In this chapter, we will separate the dialectic from the mythic in Niebuhr’s thought in order to show how, when, and why Niebuhr uses dialectical inquiry. In the following and final analysis of this dissertation, we will bring the mythic and dialectic elements back together, as Niebuhr always does, to show how they function as a fruitful addition to his ethics of Christian rhetoric.

Dialectic as Inquiry

I had a great discussion in my young men’s class this morning. Gradually I am beginning to discover that my failure with the class was due to my talking too much. Now I let them talk and the thing is becoming interesting. Of course it isn’t so easy to keep the discussion steered on any track. Sometimes we talk in circles. But the fellows are at least getting at some of the vital problems of life and I am learning something from them. Disciplinary problems have disappeared. The only one left is the fellow who is always trying to say something foolish or smart in the discussion.

—R. Niebuhr, *Leaves*

It is hard to balance the free-flowing creativity of the Socratic circle with the desire to “get somewhere.” Anyone who has sat in on a graduate seminar in any capacity knows that it requires patience, understanding, humility, and perhaps more than anything, a trust that

others present share a mutual desire to get closer to the truth. Niebuhr's Sunday school was apparently no different; for it seems that there is always one fellow who consistently tries to say something foolish or smart—and I'm afraid I've committed both sins, at one time or another, against the hallowed and sacred Socratic method. The Socratic or dialectic method generally consists of several elements, the first being that it takes place in the form of a dialogue or discussion with others. Its main focus is on topics of the utmost importance—such as the highest human values—in order to reach an agreement recognized as valid by everyone. It demands patience—“sometimes we talk in circles” Niebuhr lamented—but all good things comes to those that wait—“the fellows are at least getting at some of the vital problems of life” (*Leaves*).

“Dialectic” is derived from the Greek *dialektos*; it can mean (depending on how it is used), discourse, debate, dialogue, or conversation (Jasinski 2001). According to Aristotle it was the pre-Socratic thinker Zeno, a well-known refuter of opposing arguments, who invented the practice. Zeno used dialectic to subvert the hypotheses of his opponents by tracing out the unacceptable consequences they might lead to if followed. It was Plato, however, who established the dialectical form as dialogic and conversational. Plato's dialectical method was a rigorous and collaborative examination of questions. Plato's dialectical method is different from the Hegelian “conceptual” dialectics that Niebuhr is most known for mastering, which we analyzed in the preceding chapter on mythic narratives. The Hegelian dialectic takes two seemingly opposite or polar terms and shows how they are related to one another. In contrast, the Platonic dialectic explores conflicting propositions, hypotheses, or value statements in order to discover which of these is true and which is false. It explores these claims and tests their validity by starting with

particular appearances, placing them into general propositions, and then analyzing these propositions in different abstract and theoretical contexts. Though it was Plato who mastered the form as a literary style, it was Aristotle who scientifically formulated dialectic as a “mode of inquiry.”

There are three modes of inquiry for Aristotle, according to Farrell’s analysis: analytic, dialectic, and—Farrell’s contribution to Aristotelian and rhetorical studies—rhetoric. We will postpone addressing rhetoric as an ethical mode of inquiry until the next chapter of this analysis; for now, let’s look at the first two modes of inquiry. Analytics is the explicitly scientific mode of inquiry and it is a search for the reasons and causes of specific appearances. Analytic questions do not put forth generalizable causal connections but are interested in the essential nature and causes of particular phenomena. They are inquiries into subject-predicate relationships and they demonstrate their proofs with syllogisms. Analytics begins with what we know about the subject—an object, event or occurrence—and inquiry moves from there to the predicate relationship—into cause and effect demonstrations. For example: three people are in an automobile at night. The driver sees something flash in the sky. He asks the other passengers: “Did you both see that?” The passengers agree that they did see something flash in the sky. Thus, analytic inquiry begins with the known elements of an appearance and moves to the unknown. The car passengers are unanimously agreed, through categorical inference, that the appearance was at one time visual (it was seen), radiant (lit-up), and that it is no longer visible or radiant. As the inquiry continues the passengers may discover more areas of agreement, e.g. that the object moved from east to west, in the sky, and appeared to have a tail of light. For now, all three passengers agree that the object was the effect of divine photography: Zeus is

redecorating the halls of Olympus with pictures of the earth below; the flash was, of course, from his camera.

In the opening lines of book 1 of the *Topics*, Aristotle suggests an alternative to analytic inquiry, one that “shall be able to reason from opinions that are generally accepted” concerning all of life’s problems (100a18-21). These “first principles of science” are not disputed about when they are commonly held as true. But when they are doubted, a “kind of second-order reflective method” of inquiry is to be used, and that method is dialectic (Farrell 1993, 23). Farrell notes that analytic is concerned with the grammatical relations among subjects and predicates while dialectic is concerned with dichotomous relationships among general propositions linked by question and answer (ibid., 25). Thus, dialectic inquiry begins with, in the previous example, with a questioning of the agreed upon category with which the phenomenon was placed in. It says, in other words, “Wait a minute... I’m not sure that I agree that all visible and radiant objects that appear briefly and disappear quickly in the night sky are “divine camera flashes.” Then, it asks a question, “What exactly do we mean when we say ‘divine,’ ‘flash’ or ‘Zeus?’” Thus, definition always starts with what is admitted, either by one’s conversant or by people in general. This may also begin with a given hypothesis, e.g. let us proceed *as if* the proposition “what we saw was Zeus’ camera flash,” is true. Then, the discussion works out what follows from the hypothesis and tests these findings by other established facts (Jaeger and Hight 1986, 63). For this reason, as Farrell notes, “dialectic tends to be more powerful as a retrospective critical system than as a prospective guide to action” (1993, 34). When arguments are based on certain definite statements, contradictions always follow these dialectic advances and thus, they compel us to “re-examine the correctness of the judgments we laid down as

true, and sometimes to revise them or abandon them (Jaeger and Highet 1986, 63). In other words, we may conclude that dialectic deals with appearances from the past; it interprets and judges them in order to find larger tensions at work in their smaller oppositions (Farrell 1993, 34). This aspect of dialectic brings to light another aspect of the method. Dialectic isn't to be understood only as something that takes place between a questioner and answerer, or groups of answerers, in a cooperative search for truth through conversation. It manifest in internal thought as well, whenever we converse with ourselves, that "very obnoxious fellow," "that close relative," the *daimon*. Sometimes, individuals must interpret and judge events of the past in solicitude. In this "soundless dialogue between me and myself" dialectic is used to reflect on and conceptualize the past into a system of coherent and logical meaning.

Much of Niebuhr's journal is made-up of recordings of these dialectical conversations. The following two examples show the difference between Niebuhr's uses of the dialectic method prophetically, and hence rhetorically, contrasted with his use of the method as a mode of inquiry. The first example comes from his reflection on race relations in Detroit. "Our city race commission has finally made its report after months of investigation" he begins, noting his appreciation of the rare experience he has gotten, getting to meet with "the white and colored leaders and talk over our race problems" (*Leaves*, 115). He continues, moving from the particular situation he has experienced, to one step removed from his experience: "The situation which the colored people of the city face is really a desperate one, and no one who does not spend real time gathering the facts can have any idea of the misery and pain which exists among these people..." Then, Niebuhr moves another step away, conceptualizing the groups involved: "I wish that some of our

romanticists and sentimentalists could sit through a series of meetings where the real social problems of a city are discussed. They would be cured of their optimism.” Then, Niebuhr moves from *his* city to *all* cities like his: “A city which is built around a productive process and which gives only causal thought and incidental attention to its human problems is really a kind of hell.” Finally, his experiences become another iteration of the hedonistic creed and the entire world is indicted: “Thousands in this town are really living in torment while the rest of us eat, drink, and make merry. What a civilization!” In this example, Niebuhr moves from the particulars to the general concepts; yet he does it for prophetic rhetorical effect. It isn’t an inquiry at all, but is a polemic used to pronounce judgment on local pastors, romanticists, and finally civilization itself.

The second example comes from Niebuhr’s reflection on some criticism he received after a speech. It is particularly poignant because Niebuhr’s response is reminiscent of Socrates dialectical speaking of the young and “impertinent” Calicles. Niebuhr writes:

An impertinent youngster at the forum accused me today of being authoritarian because I quoted several modern philosophers and scientists in my address in support of my theistic belief. I made a deep bow before and congratulated him upon being so proficient in laboratory experiments in every science and so profound in his philosophical meditations that he could arrive at his conclusions without the help of anyone else, scientist or philosopher. (*Leaves*, 99)

But when Niebuhr returns home, he begins to reflect on the boy’s opinion and launches a dialectical inquiry: “His question did set me thinking on the problem of freedom” he writes; “Why do we believe what we believe, and why do we do what we do?” Niebuhr begins with his own particular experiences, first noting that if the religion of his parents and his childhood home had been harsh and unlovely he would probably have been where the young boy was, “in a position of rebellion against religion.” Then Niebuhr notes that if he had not “had the aid of this helpful professor and that illuminating book” when his

“religious convictions were undergoing adjustment” he might have discarded religion all together. After noting a few more examples pertaining to his own views and those of the class-conscious workers he preaches to, Niebuhr concludes by universalizing the reflection into abstract conceptual terms: “What we know as truth is determined by peculiar and individual perspectives. Pressures of environment, influences of heredity, and excellencies and deficiencies of teachers help determine our life philosophies.” Lastly, Niebuhr arrives at a new principle by way of this Platonic inquiry, one that happens to be framed in Hegelian dialectical terms, and yet sounds as Socratic as one can possibly sound!:

We ought therefore to hold them (truths) with decent humility and a measure of skepticism. But if we permit ourselves to be tempted into a complete subjectivism and skepticism by these facts, we put an end to all philosophy and ultimately to civilization itself. For civilization depends upon the vigorous pursuit of the highest values by people who are intelligent enough to know that their values are qualified by their interests and corrupted by their prejudices. (*Leaves*, 100)

Niebuhr’s conclusion brings us back to Jaeger’s analysis of Socratic dialogue. It’s typical subject, was “namely, the highest values in human life” (*Leaves*, 63).

The history of the first use of dialectic as a communicative *techne* is instructive for considering the relationship between mythic narratives and dialectical inquiries concerning supernatural causes and effects. Eric Havelock argues that the transition from the pre-Homeric oral culture of memory to the literate culture of Greece can be found in the separation of the listener from the spoken word that allowed for the development of self-consciousness and the breaking of habits of poetic identification (1963, 208-9). Originally, according to Havelock, the break took place in the simple form of an interrogative addressed to the poet; the listener asked the speaker to repeat himself and explain what he meant, e.g. “Say what?” The original form of the dialectical question was to force a speaker to repeat himself “with the underlying assumption that there was something unsatisfactory

about his original statement, and it had better be rephrased” (ibid.). As this happened, as poetry was forced to enter the realm of prosaics, the conception of “me thinking about Achilles” rather than “me identifying with Achilles” was born (ibid.).

Though there are wide differences between the Greeks analyzed by Havelock and Niebuhr’s audiences, Havelock’s analysis is instructive; as is Mircea Eliade’s summation of the mythic vs. dialectic distinction: “Myth” he writes, “expresses in action and drama what metaphysics and theology define dialectically” (1996, 418). Niebuhr’s use of Christian myths in sermons and sermonic essays attests to Havelock and Eliade’s claims; they function there as dramatic expressions of ultimate values that elude the rational expression of dialectic inquiries. For example, it is logically true that that our destiny is shared with the first man’s, with Adam’s, with the builders of the tower of Babel, with Paul, with the prodigal son, and with all believers, and the Church, because death is the end of us all; yet, it is also true beyond that logical analysis, for in mythic terms, we do have a sense of a shared beginning, a creator that binds us all and a *telos* that reaches beyond the grave—whether it be in a resurrection of the body or in classical notions of earthly immortality. On the other hand, Niebuhr’s explicitly theological works were addressed to audiences where the “Say what?” was implicit, if not explicit, because of their logocentric scholastic perspectives. In other words, in the last chapter we looked at the stories in the Bible Niebuhr thought contained permanent truths that couldn’t be explicated rationally without ending in logical absurdity. But Niebuhr was not Homer, and his audiences were not oral cultures; there was an underlying logic in Niebuhr’s arguments that meant audiences were bound to utter the literate interrogative, “Say what?” Thus, Niebuhr was always ready and willing to extrapolate on the myths dialectically; nay, he *insisted* on such extrapolations—

though he always pointed out their limits. In this chapter then, we look at how Niebuhr used Plato's dialectical method to address the problematic elements in Biblical myths and to seek out, not *the* truth, but a different kind of truth, i.e. not wisdom, but knowledge.

Havelock's analysis and its similarities to Niebuhr's situation is important because it shows that just because Niebuhr is talking about a Christian "concept," he is not necessarily using mythic narratives "mythically" or "poetically." In fact, this is the basic distinction between myth and theology, the latter being the dialectical investigation of the former. It is not the subject but the *method* of inquiry that differentiates the mythic—and the analytical and rhetorical for that matter—from the dialectical. If the starting point is a commonly held opinion that creates two conflicting propositions and these propositions are broadened into universalized concepts and their consequences are traced out to find out if they are desirable, then we have a dialectical argument. Interestingly enough, we also are left with a more "realistic" view of the situation.

When we look at Niebuhr's use of dialectic, we are looking at the "realism" aspect of the "pragmatic Christian realism" label he is often given. When man needs to make sense out of his place in history, when he needs meaning to the vast dramas of life, he reaches out for a mythic narrative. When man desires to understand the chaos and conflicts of this world rationally, when the principles of his myths butt up against the realities of this world, he explores them rationally in order to harmonize his thoughts and values with the appearances he encounters daily, using the dialectical method. Dialectic is used to survey the world as realistically as possible; it seeks truth over deception by peeling away the layers of reality in order to better understand the world. This is why the *topic* of a dialectical inquiry is limited to one, though it covers a broad range of subtopics. McKeon

notes that, in Plato's view, "dialectic simultaneously defines terms, clarifies minds, and discovers truths about things; it is the method of any science that treats of the nature of things" (1954, 4). It may be the nature of things that the awful grace of god grants us wisdom through suffering, it may be natural that Zeus causes it to rain, or that when perfect love, like that of Christ, enters the natural realm it destroys itself because it necessarily relinquishes its power. In other words, where the realistic analysis of the natural world results in logical absurdity, one must look to a higher principle, which comes from one's religious perspective—whether it be Marxism, Romanticism, Patriotism, or Christianity. One's first principle will always supersede the entire dialectic and cannot be included in the inquiry itself. The ultimate terms of Christianity are Niebuhr's highest terms and in his opinion, history and the facts of experience verify them as such.

The terms of Niebuhr's "dialectic inquiries" are "dialectical terms." Recalling the difference between Platonic dialectic and Hegelian dialectics, we may also now invoke Bentham's distinction between "real entities" and the "fictitious entities" of the law—the latter made up of what Burke calls "dialectical terms" (1989, 193). They have no strict location as do terms for "real entities," i.e. terms for things that can be seen, touched, smelled, or thrown, etc. In contrast to these terms that belong to the order of *motion* and *perception*, dialectical terms are words for *essence* and *principle* (ibid.). They are "titular" words like "capitalism" and necessarily lack a positive referent. If one traces out these terms into positive details, one will immediately notice that they are also "polar" terms because they depend upon another term for their distinctive traits, e.g. "capitalism, set beside "socialism," looks very different from "capitalism," set beside "feudalism" (ibid.). Dialectical terms refer to *ideas* and not *things* and as Bentham notes, they are more

concerned with *action* and *attitude* than with *perception*; they fall under the head of *ethics* and *form* rather than *knowledge* or *information*. Finally, we note in passing that when these dialectical terms are placed into a hierarchical order of priority, leaving the jangling relation of dialectical opposites, they become “ultimate terms”—ideological weapons for the rhetorical battlefield (ibid., 196). With that said, we may now proceed to Niebuhr’s dialectic inquiries into his “dialectical” terms and, where appropriate, denote how Niebuhr negotiates the tension between jangling and hierarchical “fictitious entities”—though as Niebuhr points out: there is nothing fictitious, for example, about self-realization through self-sacrifice—though it is never guaranteed.

Love: The Law of Life

The ethic of Jesus is the perfect fruit of prophetic religion. Its ideal of love has the same relation to the facts and necessities of human experience as the God of prophetic faith has to the world. It is drawn from, and relevant to, every moral experience. It is immanent in life as God is immanent in the world. It transcends the possibilities of human life in its final pinnacle as God transcends the world. It must, therefore, be confused neither with the ascetic ethic of world-denying religions nor with the prudential morality of naturalism, designed to guide good people to success and happiness in this world.

—R. Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*

Suppose you had no knowledge about or interest in Jesus Christ, no interest in religious myths, and no faith in an immanent/transcendent God. “Dr. Niebuhr,” you might ask, “What does any of this have to do with me?” Though Jesus is the perfect symbol of the love ideal in history, Niebuhr would have responded, as he often did, by demonstrating both empirically and dialectically that the love ideal is the law of life.

One need not be a religious believer according to Niebuhr, to recognize that love is indeed the law of life. “Perhaps the clearest proof that the law of love” is the law of life is

found in the fact that societies consistently elaborate their minimal moral standards into higher standards (*ICE*, 65). Every society prohibits murder and theft, but every society tries to go beyond these negative prohibitions as well. They are not enough for us. It is true, that only negative commands can be enforced legally. "But the moral codes and ideals of every advanced society demand more than mere prohibitions of theft and murder. Higher conceptions of justice are developed." Thus, the right to live gets transmuted into the right to secure goods, to own property, to have equal opportunities to do both of these. Equality is always the regulative principle of justice and in this ideal, the law of love is echoed. It is the law of love that is revealed in it because it is rationally absurd. No logical argument can be made for equality as the highest principle of justice without assuming certain presuppositions that cannot be gotten at with reason. We start with that presupposition because we know, in our heart of hearts, that it is the law of our spirits.

More evidence that the law of love is the law of life is found in the symbols of the law in love in nature, the most adequate one being that in nature we feel and observe a "conscious impulse of unity between life and life (*ICE*, 23). Since all moral demands are actually demands of unity, "in one sense the ethic of which results from the command of love is related to any possible ethical system (*ibid.*). Individuals know, deep down, that the law of love is indeed the law of life because every self "seeks to relate itself harmoniously to other selves and other unities." However, this is precisely where the limits of natural symbols reach their limits.

The love ideal distinguishes itself from every form of naturalism and prudence in its attitude toward this force of egoism. When naturalists such as L.T. Hobhouse define the good as "harmony in the fulfillment of vital capacity," they define it correctly, according to

Niebuhr; “but every naturalistic ethic can demand no more than harmony within chaos, love within the possibilities set by human egoism” (ibid.) Niebuhr argues that this type of “prudential ethic” is based on the illusion that some basic natural harmony between life exists, or it is forced to sanction egotistical and self-seeking behaviors as “natural.” The love ideal is unlike Adam Smith’s ethic, which regards egoism as harmless because it is imbedded in a pre-established harmony; unlike utilitarianism, which regards egoism as impotent because reason can transmute its anarchies into an ordered whole; and unlike Thomas Hobbes’ ethic, which regards egoism as the basic reality of human existence. How is it unlike them? It has nothing to say about them at all...

The love ideal (embodied by Jesus but not exclusive to those who follow him—in fact, regardless of the fact that “Christians” often ignore it) doesn’t deal with the immediate moral problems of everyday life at all—“the problem of arranging some kind of armistice between various contending factions and forces” (ibid.). “It has nothing to say about the relativities of politics and economics,” Niebuhr argues, “nor of the necessary balances of power which exist in even the most intimate social relationships” like those between coworkers, neighbors or PTA members. The absolute perfectionism of the love ethic sets itself, not only against the egoism of individuals, but also against the necessary and prudent defenses against the egotistical expressions of others. It has no connection to the “horizontal points of a political or social ethic or with the diagonals which a prudential individual ethic draws between the moral ideal and the facts of a given situation” (ibid., 24).³² The love ideal has only a vertical dimension, Niebuhr argues, “between the loving

³² We will explore this idea further in the final chapter of our analysis but for now let us note that, we may conclude from Niebuhr’s interpretation of Jesus’ ethic that the love ideal has *nothing* to do with an ethics of rhetoric—even a distinctively *Christian* one.

will of God and the will of man,” or to extract the mythic element, between the ultimate source of life’s meaning and harmony, and one’s own desire to be at peace with and part of Its purposes.

Agape’s polar term, its dialectical opposite, is not “hate”; it is not conceptual at all in fact. It is a positive term that can only stand in contradiction to “not-love,” just as “dog” can only be understood beside “not-dog.” “Not-perfect-love” is *every human action in this world, even those that approximate it*. The love commandment, Niebuhr argues, is the commandment that demands ideational perfection. Its counterpart, recalling the permanent truth Niebuhr finds in the myth of the Fall is Sin; “it stands in juxtaposition to the fact of sin. It helps, in fact, to create the consciousness of sin” (ibid., 39). *Agape* love rigorously judges all natural forms of love in human life. This begins with a judgment on man’s self-assertion, which is fundamentally rooted in the “natural will to survive.” Though the will to survive is not a bad thing essentially, man’s freedom, imagination and creativity, when added to this will-to-survive, become a will-to-power and result in his expansion of this natural impulse into, what is essentially “self-love.” It manifests itself in man’s love of possessions and in man’s love of himself—especially the self-love of “good” people.

We can imagine Socrates’ face upon hearing such propositions like “The love ideal is the law of life.” “Hold on! Hold on!” we can hear Socrates say: “What is love?! What is an ideal!? What is a law!? You must define your terms!” Niebuhr would oblige Socrates, as he has all of the readers who’ve cherished his dialectical inquiries since. We must note from the very beginning that Niebuhr always insisted that justice and love were forever bound to one another dialectically, though not as polar terms. “In so far as justice admits the claims of the self, it is something less than love,” he writes; “Yet it cannot exist without love and

remain justice. For without the “grace” of love, justice always denigrates into something less than justice.”³³ This is just one of many examples from Niebuhr’s writings that we will come across, where love and justice collide in dialectical inquiry. In the following analysis, we will do our best to note Niebuhr’s analysis of these terms in isolation and where, for instance, justice finds its way into our conversations on love, note it only in passing. In our analysis of Niebuhr’s dialectic of justice, we will collide once again with love and it is there where the relationship between the two will become more explicit and, hopefully, beneficial to my readers.

When we talk about love Niebuhr argues that we must talk maturely, or we will become sentimental.³⁴ Speaking to the church, he argues that we must not say Christians are all potential martyrs or that they are more unselfish than others. Modestly and basically, love means simply, “that life has no meaning except in terms of responsibility; responsibility toward our family, toward our nation, toward our civilization and, now, by the pressures of history, toward the universe of mankind which includes our enemies” (ibid., 35). There are possibilities of realizing pinnacles of love beyond this simple meaning. But in this sermonic essay, Niebuhr only mentions two of them and his analysis of them takes up only two small written pages. It isn’t a dialectical inquiry at all, but is a rhetorical one. Niebuhr, pulling from I Corinthians, is preaching a message about faith, hope and love as responses to the threat of meaningless in an absurd world. Camus makes an appearance in the sermon; so too do Thomas Jefferson and John Adams; so to does an example about family life and forgiveness. Though this summary definition is nice, we can see how drastic

³³ (Niebuhr 1992) (hereafter cited as *L&J*).

³⁴ (Niebuhr 1991) (hereafter cited as *J&M*).

the change is when he is writing for an academic audience and performing a dialectical inquiry by looking at another of Niebuhr's inquiries into love.

Niebuhr's analysis of the love ideal in *Christian Realism and Political Problems* his dialectical masterpiece on the subject, and the fact that it was reprinted in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr* supports this claim. The inquiry makes up only one of its many chapters, "Love and Law in Protestantism and Catholicism." Niebuhr begins in true dialectic fashion: "The analysis of this issue may well begin with a definition of the nature of law" (ERN, 147). The question must be considered subjectively and materially, he argues. Subjectively, law is a form of constraint or coercion or, "as Aquinas puts it, it is the direction of to 'perform virtuous acts by reason of some outward cause.'" This compulsion may come from the "force and prestige of the mores and customs of a community" which compel its citizens to act contrary to their inclinations. But the compulsion of law also comes from an inner element: "the compulsion of conscience, the force of the sense of obligation." There is a constant tension then, in every personality, between duty and inclination, felt both internally and externally. Where this tension doesn't exist, it is dissolved into love (ibid., 148). "Materially, law represents the detailed prescription of duties and obligations which the self owes to itself, to God, and to its neighbors." This is what we mean by "positive law" and it gains its force through its specificity; thus, many of these laws are annulled due to their "vagueness" by bodies like the Supreme Court. Thus, there are material laws, which need not be written down, in specific "thou shalt nots" but are nevertheless compulsory. Niebuhr notes that we all accept that there are certain laws that are not particularly detailed materially and yet are more specific than the "law of love." These laws are generated by the customs and mores of a community and may rise to "universal norms

which seem to have their source not in particular communities but in the common experience of mankind” (ibid.).

To understand how love is related to the law, Niebuhr argues that we must consider it in both the subjective and material dimensions of both love and law. He writes:

Subjectively, the question is how the experience of love, in which the “ought” is transcended, nevertheless contains a “thou shalt.” Materially, the question is how the indeterminate possibilities of love are related to the determinate and specified obligations defined by law. (ibid., 149)

This dialectical relation of love to law, “as both its fulfillment and its end (*pleroma* and *telos*), as fulfilling all possibilities of law and yet standing in contradiction to it” is the basis of the problem of all speculations on the relation of love to law. Though in this essay Niebuhr is specifically interested in how these speculations get articulated in Catholic and Protestant traditions, we may avail ourselves of these specific concerns and draw on Niebuhr’s own dialectical inquiry, found woven into the threads of this essay.

The subjective dimension of the love/law dialectic is found in the problem of the “push” of duty and the “pull” of grace (ibid., 150). Niebuhr argues that when the law of love comes to us as a “thou shalt” it is obviously a law. Love, as a law in this case, need not be specific but “is simply the summary of all our obligations.” Yet love may also mean a perfect harmony between our duty and our inclinations, in which case the duty is not felt as duty at all, i.e. as the Biblical expression says, “we love the things that thou commandest.” This latter feeling is what we may call the “pull” of grace, while the former, the sense of obligation from a commandment, is called the “push” of duty. The “pull” of grace is a significant factor in relationships like those between family members where we may seek the good of wife or child without a sense of obligation. The “push” of duty, the “ought,” is more relevant in our love for those beyond our social circles, as when we love “mankind.”

Pure obligation, however, is never enough. It isn't completely impotent but it is "more impotent than generally recognized" Niebuhr writes (*ibid.*, 153). This is why, he argues, that moralistic sermons that tell us what we ought to do are almost always boring. This is also why modern psychiatry approaches juvenile delinquency from the side of "common grace;" it doesn't preach to them about what they ought to do, or that they ought to "accept themselves," but insist that they must find security in the love of others, which will then give them the freedom to "let go" and love others. Finally, this also reveals how the law of love can become a "loveless" instrument, as it does when pastors chide their congregations or parents chide their children for not meeting the ultimate possibilities of the law of love, like self-sacrifice and forgiveness, as if these were simple accomplishments of the will. This castigation represents a failure to recognize that, "on the subjective side, love is a curious compound of willing through the strength of the sense of obligation and of willing not by the strength of our will but by the strength which enters the will through grace" (*ibid.*). In other words, when we insist that the law of love is a simple possibility to be actualized in every historical situation, we have not accounted for man's love of self and have ignored the aspect of love that requires grace.

Having subjectively considered that love and law are defined dialectically as grace and duty, we may now consider the problem in its material dimensions. Niebuhr defines the problem this way: "Materially the problem is the relation of love as the sum and total of all law and of love as defining indeterminate possibilities, transcending law" (*ibid.*, 154). These indeterminate possibilities exist because they are correlated to man's indeterminate freedom. Niebuhr's thought here intersects nicely with what Hannah Arendt calls man's condition of "natality." Every human action can be considered as miraculous. Every human

being that is born represents a radically new and novel phenomenon that may achieve the unprecedented. In other words, man will continually surprise you; he never ceases to amaze us. In so far as some aspects of man are determined and natural, we may state the norms to which his actions ought to conform and fulfill. But in so far as he is free to make history, to change his environment, to create new injustices and new approximations of the love ideal, no such strict standards or laws can confine him and the law of love transcends the laws of justice.

There are four points where we can clearly see the love ideal transcend the law. The first point is when love is considered as universalistic. "The freedom of man over every historic situation" Niebuhr writes, "means that his obligation to others cannot be limited to partial communities of nature and history, to family, tribe, or nation" (ibid.). Niebuhr recalls the Biblical statement of this truth: "If ye love them that love you what thanks have ye?" Love doesn't legitimate natural boundaries and is universal in its scope. This is, on the one hand, considered in the afore mentioned subjective aspect of love as a "sum total of all our obligations." Niebuhr concludes, after surveying how Augustine, Stoicism, and Kierkegaard understand love, that the universalistic aspect of love is paradoxically "both within and beyond the love commandment as law." "It represents the outer circumference of the totality of our obligations and to our neighbors and to God," he writes; "It includes all of them but also goes beyond anything that can be specifically defined" (ibid., 159). In other words, as Niebuhr notes in his introduction to this section, this element of love may really belong to the element of law. We are left in a vague sort of middle ground here, perhaps recalling what Simone de Beauvoir would call, "the ethics of ambiguity."

The second point we find that love transcends law is in its sacrificial aspects. It manifests when the preservation of the self in history becomes problematic. This occurs because man has some freedom over his self as contingent and natural in history. Niebuhr again uses Jesus's words to capture this truth, but he just as well could have achieved the desired effect by quoting from Plato's *Apology* or *Phaedo*: "Fear not them which are able to kill the body, but rather those that are able to destroy both soul and body in hell" and "Whosoever loseth his life will find it" (ibid., 159). Niebuhr doesn't use the Johannine version of self-sacrifice but its poetic qualities make it worthwhile to mention: "Greater love hath no man than this: that he lay down his life for his friends" (We should immediately see why Niebuhr avoids John's paraphrase of Christ's words; it has violated the universalistic element in *agape* love by including the qualifier "for his friends"). Though the love commandment promises self-realization through self-sacrifice, this commandment transcends the law and history because its historical success is not a guarantee. If one loses oneself *in order to* find oneself, if one loves as a means to a self-fulfilling end, one cannot achieve the end desired. Thus considered, we can see how its illogicality makes sacrificial love the second pinnacle of love, which represents both the completion, and the annulment of love as law (ibid.). Niebuhr writes:

[Sacrificial love] is the completion of the law of love because perfect love has no logical limit short of the readiness to sacrifice the self for the other. Yet it is a point which stands beyond all law, because the necessity of sacrificing one's life for another cannot be formulated as an obligation, nor can it be achieved under the whip of the sense of obligation. (ibid.)

Law then, in the determinate sense, stops at distributive justice and mutual love; yet, a "sensitive conscience" will be uneasy when another life is taken even in self-defense or when a common peril results in the loss of another's life but not one's own (ibid., 160).

Perfect and self-sacrificing love, then, is demonstrated as the true law of life whenever one experience those feelings of “survivor’s guilt” after a tragedy as when the sole survivor after an automobile wreck is left tearfully asking, “Why them? Why not me?” Again, the law of sacrificial love transcended even the starkest embodiment of evil sense Hitler when, though some celebrated in the streets, sensitive conscience’s felt a sense of sadness when images of Osama bin Laden’s dead body appeared on our televisions.

Sacrificial or “unprudential love,” which doesn’t calculate mutual advantages, is dialectically related to both “mutual love” (*philia*) and “distributive justice.” In both, man considers himself one among many equals in a group and, using reason, calculates and appropriates the values of life as justly as possible to achieve reciprocity of advantages. This “will to do justice” Niebuhr argues, is a “form of love” because it affirms the interests of one’s neighbors (ibid., 160). Likewise, mutual love is also a form of love because it enhances the life of the other. However, these expressions of love always fall short of *agape* love, the self-sacrificing and universal love ideal, because in them, the self always claims “an equal share” for himself. We find then, that *agape* love cannot be “embodied in any moral code” nor can it be achieved by the compulsion of obligations; and yet, we also find that it is nevertheless, as evidenced by both common sense and even the pagan reverence for heroic sacrifice, that “such heedless love” is “the final norm of love” (ibid.).

We can’t separate *agape* from its natural brethren, *eros* and *philia*, by drawing a neat line. The dialectics of love are messy; we may simply assert that *agape* transcends the line of natural love all together. But it is instructive that when we look closer at the way mutual love is genuinely practiced, we find that it doesn’t denigrate into a strict, rigid, excessive calculation of mutual advantages. We are, in other words, often willing to let things slide.

On the material side, for instance, consider the way expenses are often negotiated between roommates or friends on a road trip. Upon departure, I may fill up the gas tank of my car and spend \$50. On the return trip home, my friend may fill up my gas tank and it only cost \$48. Assuming that I even look to see how much my friend spent on his fill-up—and it is highly likely I wouldn't—it would seem petty to insist that the friend give me an extra \$1 to make the expenditures equal. It would be more than petty if, supposing the friend were robbed the night before, if I told him he couldn't go on the trip because he didn't have any money. With roommates, a too strict weighing of mutual advantages can make life in the home intolerable. Perhaps nothing demonstrates that one doesn't truly love a roommate like the insistence on a strict equality in cabinet space, fridge space, and that "what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours." If this were the highest manifestation of love, we would find married couples practicing the same rational prudence, which common sense tells us would be absurd. This demonstrates then, that in moments of *philia* the hints and traces of the heedless and uncalculating love of *agape* can be found. If this were not the case, we'd be left with Aristotle's solution, maintaining friendships only with equals.

The line between natural love and *agape* love is also messy on the subjective side. The sense of obligation may "prompt men into a hazardous cause" Niebuhr argues; "but the final act of sacrifice by which a soldier gives his life for his comrade is, as even the army rightly surmises, 'beyond the call of duty'" (ibid., 161). The ultimate sacrifice of one's life for another can't be gotten at by obligation and duty. "It is possible only by an accretion of strength to the will which is in the realm of grace." Again, Niebuhr traces the idea of love as self-sacrifice through its conceptual historical expositions, noting where Catholicism, D'Arcy, Nygren, Luther, and Social Gospellers have wrongly interpreted self-sacrificing love.

His criticisms of these thinkers begins by pointing out their efforts “do justice to the dialectical relation” but ultimately, they make a dialectical error. We need only note, for example, Catholicism’s mistake: “It declares that this perfection is possible only by grace. But it makes grace to mean the ‘fitness’ of man to embrace monastic poverty, in which he cannot call anything his own” (ibid., 161-2). The result is that the sacrificial dimension of love becomes a call to perfection and logically, this is “yet another and more rigorous statement of love as law,” which Niebuhr, at this point in his analysis, has gone to great dialectical pains to show is not actually the case.

The third area where we find the love ideal transcending law is in the realm of forgiveness. Forgiveness is to punitive justice what sacrificial love is to distributive justice; that is, both its completion and its annulment (ibid., 164). Forgiveness completes punitive justice because it is a rigorous analysis of all the factors involved in a wrong act and leads to an understanding of all the extenuating circumstances and causal preconditions that lead up to the crime. “Imaginative justice,” one of Niebuhr’s favorite and more profound terms, “moves in the direction of forgiveness, or at least to remedial rather than punitive justice.” On the other hand, forgiveness is also a contradiction to punitive justice because forgiveness represents a “morality beyond morality.”³⁵ Agape love is like the impartialities of nature in which the rain falls on the just and the unjust and the sun rises and sets on both good and evil. Agape, like nature, doesn’t discriminate between those it encounters. Forgiveness is applied to the just and the unjust, more specifically, to the neighbor and to the enemy. There are no nice discriminations and calculations concerning “merit and demerit in forgiveness, any more than there is a nice discrimination of interests in

³⁵ Niebuhr borrows an idea from Berdyaev here but, in typical Niebuhrian fashion, there is no citation to reference.

sacrificial love” (ibid., 165). What forgiveness really comes down to, Niebuhr notes elsewhere, is “mutual forbearance” (*J&M*, 36). This spirit of mutual forbearance can be found in every family unit, where we see it best expressed in a “certain sense of humor.” Families can’t exist purely by the sense of justice and laws. Thus, we all know intuitively that forgiveness is a law of love that transcends law and enters purely into the realm of grace.

Niebuhr doesn’t just pick and choose verses from the Bible in order to make a preordained point. His dialectic is honestly multi-sided. Every proposition has some truths and falsehoods and Niebuhr is always quick to qualify his previous dialectic with another. His analysis of forgiveness highlights this. We just noted in what ways forgiveness is a completion of law and then, we noted how it actually transcends the law. But Niebuhr has more to say, just in case the reader thinks that we’ve started with one proposition and, in moving to another, left the other behind. He follows his last analysis up with another qualifying dialectic: “Yet even forgiveness comes partially into the category of love as law” (*ERN*, 165). Niebuhr notes that we are warned that if we don’t forgive others our heavenly Father won’t forgive us. Thus, forgiveness here enters a category like those of the “rights of man” in which we owe forgiveness to our brother; or rather, Niebuhr notes, we owe it to God. Forgiveness then, is also a commandment and thus we arrive at the conclusion “that even on this pinnacle of grace law is not completely transcended” (ibid.). If the reader at this point feels a bit of conceptual rigor mortis then the point that Niebuhr is truly a master dialectician holds true. If one is looking for some hard truths you can run out into the world and *do something with*, one shouldn’t be discussing things with an “electric eel.” Dialectical dialysis (from the Greek *dialusis*) removes those ideological impurities from an conceptual

inquiry, thereby filtering out the active ingredients of the logos that promote fanatical action. Dialysis leads then to paralysis, not kinesis. Of course a genuine inquiry is never completely free from ideology or “cookery.” But over and over again, Niebuhr’s dialectical inquiries, like Socrates’s, run ideas through the conceptual sieve enough times, where the “taint” of such impurities are remote and their active ingredients are cooked out.

The fourth and final place where love transcends law, is found in empathy. Whenever an individual “penetrates imaginatively and sympathetically into the life of another” one sees the “final pinnacle of grace in the realm of love” (ibid., 166). Here, Niebuhr critiques both nods to and critiques the work Buber and Brunner, noting that this aspect of agape is equivalent to Buber’s *I and Thou* and Brunner’s *Divine Imperative* (ibid., 167). However, Niebuhr points out that it is not, as the Catholic counsels of perfection argue, the “very substance” of this aspect of agape. If it were the very substance of it, Niebuhr argues, then love would no longer include “the general spirit of justice which expresses itself in the structures, laws, social arrangements, and economic form” men use to regulate their common lives and establish tolerable harmony with one another. Niebuhr insists that on the contrary, “The love which wills justice must not be excluded from the realm of *Agape*” (ibid.). An act of personal kindness is not more agape-like than a statesman’s scheme in the interest of more justice. Niebuhr concludes that the effort by those like Buber to “confine *Agape* to the love of personal relations and to place all the structures and artifices of justice outside that realm makes [agape] irrelevant to the problems of man’s common life” (ibid.). But once again, Niebuhr isn’t done...

“On the other hand” writes Niebuhr—perhaps more than any thinker has ever written four words in the same order—“it is true that beyond and above every human

relation as ordered by a fixed structure of justice, by custom, tradition, and legal enactment, there remain indeterminate possibilities of love in the individual and personal encounters of those who are in the structure” (ibid., 167-8). No structure of justice can decide, in the final analysis, whether men meet with imagination or ambitions of dominion, with generosity or envy, with humility or with pride. Humans can corrupt the highest system of justice and they can redeem the worst. Perhaps the highest system of justice ever created was American democracy, forever tainted by slavery. This same system was ultimately redeemed by, as we will explore in more detail in this dissertations’ conclusion, individuals who marched with Dr. King, out of both love *and* a desire for justice. To take the empathetic love out of the march from Selma to Washington is to convert it downwards into something less than legislative justice. It was about Jim Crow laws but *agape* was there, hovering above and in the hearts of each marcher.

Niebuhr’s analysis of *empathetic* love was pretty far ahead of its time. Niebuhr understood the problems that come from “creative understanding,” the “live-entering” of one into another in a way that wasn’t “limited,” “finalized” “predetermined” and unethical—so we return here to a place where Niebuhr crosses thought-paths with Bakhtin.³⁶ Niebuhr writes:

³⁶ Briefly we may note the thought-crossing: In Bakhtin’s idea of “live-entering” Morson and Emerson (1990) write, “one simultaneously renounces and exploits one’s surplus; one brings into interaction both perspectives simultaneously and creates an ‘architectonics’ of vision reducible to neither. This architectonics produces new understanding” (54). Bakhtin mostly abandoned this vocabulary later and replaced it with his ideas on dialogue. But his notion of new understanding is particularly relevant to his later terminology of “creative understanding.” Like empathy, creative understanding happens when one enters into the lived experience of another while not renouncing one’s own position outside the other in time, space, and culture. This outsidersness creates the potential for a dialogue that helps us understand culture in a profound and more ethical way. Dialogue, Morson and Emerson write, “educates each side about itself and about the other, and it not only discovers but

The commandment to love thy neighbor as the self must finally culminate in the individual experience in which one self seeks to penetrate deeply into the mystery of the other self and yet stand in reverence before a mystery which he has no right to penetrate. (168)

This empathetic aspect of agape is part of the law of nature because in nature man has an indeterminate freedom that demands and requires at least a minimal amount of this intimacy. However, no law can compel man to practice empathy and no sense of obligation “can provide the imagination and forbearance” by which it is accomplished. We may also note with Niebuhr that this intimacy is related to sacrificial love as well, because the entering into another’s life necessarily means “the sacrificial abandonment of the claims of the self for the needs of the other” (ibid., 169).

Niebuhr makes one final note about empathetic agape. It is true that personal friendship is where one finds the pinnacles of *Agape* and it must follow then, Niebuhr argues, that a sexual partnership has a natural basis for agape far beyond other partnerships. We should note that in the 1950’s Niebuhr would have been treading on thin ice addressing Christian audiences about sex. That this is the case is exactly why he addresses it. In Niebuhr’s opinion, sexual union as a parable, symbol and basis of agape was going underappreciated in Christian thought because of the generally negative attitude toward sex that it inherited from Greek thought, and because the particularity of the sexual union makes it suspect to agape’s universalism (ibid., 169). Though no particular

activates potentials” that are “realizable only through future activity and dialogue.” The prophet does this by invoking the power of the Word. This is because “no living word,” writes Bakhtin, “relates to its object in a singular way.” He continues: “Between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that it is often difficult to penetrate. It is precisely in the process of living interaction with this specific environment that the word may be individualized and given stylistic shape.”

relationship can exhaust the meaning of agape, Niebuhr argues that the marital union is an instructive symbol of how something that is natural, can be “endlessly transfigured by grace,” revealing to us how “the possibilities of love as law and love at the limits of law and love beyond the limits [of law]” and demonstrating the truth of “the logic of love as law and love as grace” (ibid., 170).

Agape love and law, to summarize Niebuhr’s dialectical inquiry, must be analyzed in both subjective and objective spheres. In the subjective sphere we have the feelings of obligation (law) and grace (love). In the objective sphere we approach the abstract concept of law to its highest possibilities of perfection, love. In the subjective sphere, it was argued that love and law existed in a phenomenological and dialectical relationship defined as the “push” of duty and the “pull” of grace. On the material side of the inquiry, four areas where love fulfilled law, transcended law and annulled law, were analyzed. Niebuhr argues that from the Biblical perspective, agape love is universalistic, self-sacrificing, forgiving and empathetic.

Love: “The Impossible Possibility”

Man, as the creature of both necessity and freedom, must, like Moses, always perish outside the promised land. He can see what he cannot reach.

—R. Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*

We might, in the spirit of Kenneth Burke, rephrase Niebuhr’s analysis. It isn’t that man can *see* what he cannot reach; it is more correct to say that man, a user of symbols and inventor of the negative, can *conceptualize what he sees* into ideas he cannot reach. Agape love is one such conceptualization. It is just as important, Niebuhr argues, that we know “what is impossible as what is possible in the moral demands under which all human

beings stand" (*ICE*, 83). This is the task Niebuhr undertook constantly and we will now turn our attention to how he proceeds, from a dialectical analysis of love, through a realistic survey of the human scene, to a dialectical inquiry of justice.

Agape is both universalistic and perfectionistic. It is universalistic for two reasons. First, agape is impartial and equally distributed for a transcendent *reason*, and secondly, it is equally critical of all *objects* of devotion. For instance, Stoic universalism declares that we love universally because we are all equally part of the divine community since we all have elements of the *logos*. This idea ultimately ends in an aristocratic condescension because only the intelligent are really included (*ICE*, 30). In contrast to Stoic universalism, agape universalism insists that the reason one should love everyone is because God loves everyone and the reason to forgive everyone is because God forgives everyone. In other words, one loves with agape because one senses and feels that the agape love they feel, sense, and know in their being, comes from a transcendent source, and they seek to align their own wills with that source's Will. Not only is the universalistic element found in the *reason* for agape, but also in the *objects* of agape. Agape concludes that the love of *anyone* and *anything*, here in this world, whether it is nation, family or self, is wrong. In *agape* love, the natural devotion man feels toward his husband, wife, daughter, or son, are deemed the roots of unethical and unjust love; they are ultimately extensions of self-love. Accordingly, Niebuhr argues "surely this is not an ethic which can give us specific guidance in the detailed problems of social morality where the relative claims of family, community, class, and nation must be constantly weighed" (*ibid.*, 31). It is impossible to design, as Tolstoy tried to do when he objected to jails, a socio-moral policy based on the insights of *agape* love. "Society must punish criminals" Niebuhr argues, "But this fact does not invalidate the

insight which sees the relative good and the relative evil in both judges and criminals from a high perspective (ibid., 29). The rigorous perfectionism and universalism of agape love can never be fulfilled or realized in our own time. Agape love, Niebuhr concludes, “may offer valuable insights to and sources of criticism for a prudential social ethic which deals with the present realities; but no such social ethic can be directly derived from a pure religious ethic” (ibid., 32). Agape love is never capable of actualization or realization in man’s present existence.

On the other hand, agape love is relevant to man’s existence or it would not be felt as the law of this life nor would it be revealed to him, as the divine will reveals it. This is why the Bible places agape’s realization at the end of time, in eschatology. “Placing the fulfillment at the end of time and not in a realm above temporality is to remain true to the genius of prophetic religion and state mythically what cannot be stated rationally” (ibid., 35). If stated rationally, the result is the complete dualistic split mentioned in the previous chapter, between time and eternity, and the eternal becomes irrelevant in the here and now. Stating the matter mythically does “justice to the fact that the eternal can only be fulfilled in the temporal” argues Niebuhr; “But since myth is forced to state a paradoxical aspect of reality in terms of concepts connoting historical sequence, it always leads to historical illusions” (ibid., 36). We call these historical illusions idealism, “apocalypticisms” and “utopianisms” But, as Niebuhr tells us:

The apocalypse is a mythical expression of the impossible possibility under which all human life stands. The kingdom of God is always at hand in the sense that the impossibilities are really possible, and lead to new actualities in given moments of history. Nevertheless every actuality of history reveals itself, after the event, as only an approximation of the ideal; and the Kingdom of God is therefore not here. It is in fact always coming but never here. (ibid.)

Thus, we have come full circle in the dialectic of agape love and in fact, it is here we see where every dialectical inquiry begins. *After the event* says Niebuhr, after we say “That was agape love” or “surely this must be the Kingdom of God,” we may, by defining our terms and inquiring into concepts—by asking, “Well what *is* agape love, exactly?” or, “What do you mean by *Kingdom of God*?”—and inevitably we find that the terms transcend our own time, though they speak to our temporal experiences, dialogues, and spirits. In other words, no matter what happens here and now, if man is still around to survey the scene afterward, he will inquire about the events of the past, he will dialectically measure them up against an ultimate term or ideal, and he will always judge those past events as inadequate realizations of the concept. Man is “goaded by a spirit of perfection” writes Kenneth Burke; and thus, the ideal will always be relevant to the actual and, so long as man also uses earthly symbols to define “perfection,” the Good, and the ultimate, he is destined, after a dialectical inquiry, to come up short.

The love ideal of agape is “more than the product of a morbidly sensitive religious fantasy” (ibid., 38). If we consider human life in its fullest dimension, we discover that it includes “not only an impossible ideal, but realities of sin and evil which are more than simple imperfections.” It isn’t man’s imperfect nature that causes him to harm others; it is his willingness to love himself more than others. Niebuhr writes: “Anything less than perfect love in human life is destructive of life. All human life stands under an impending doom because it does not live by the law of love. Egoism is always destructive. The wages of sin is death.” Our world testifies to this truth; we know that when America loves itself more it breeds destructive nationalist sentiments and when the white man loves himself more than the black one he breeds hatred in himself and resentment that leads to vengeance in

his enemy. The peace of this world is achieved by strife, Niebuhr argues, echoing Augustine; “The peace of the city of God can use and transmute the lesser and insecure peace of the city of the world; but that can be done only if the peace of the world is not confused with the ultimate peace of God” (ibid.). “Confronted with this situation humanity always faces a double task” Niebuhr argues (ibid.). On the one hand, we must “reduce the anarchy of the world to some kind of immediately sufferable order and unity;” and on the other hand, we must set these tentative, relative, and insecure unities under the criticism of the ultimate ideal: agape love (ibid.)

What is the relationship then, between love and law *as such*. Laws as such, norms of conduct prescribed by custom, legal enactments, scriptural injunctions, rational intuition, prescribe duties and obligations “without seeming reference to the ultimate spirit of law, namely, love” (CRPP, 170). Niebuhr, in dialogue with himself, asks: “What is the standing of such law in a Christian scheme of ethics and how is it related to it?” To answer this question, Niebuhr doesn’t pull an authoritarian verse from the Bible but sets out to define the nature of the law dialectically. Every such law, he writes, will have two characteristics. First, it will state man’s obligations to his neighbor in minimal and negative terms, i.e. “Thou shalt not steal.” Secondly, it will state these obligations “in terms which presuppose the fact of sin and self-interest,” the complexity of claims and counterclaims arbitrated by some “rule of reason” rather than by the ultimate scruples of love (ibid., 171). Law is thus defined by what it does. This means that the law, no matter its conceptions, accepts and regulates self-interest, prohibiting only its most excessive forms. It doesn’t ask one to love the neighbor but asks one not kill him; it doesn’t command one to seek her neighbor’s well being but only asks one respect his rights. “Broadly speaking” then, “the end of law is justice” Niebuhr

argues; “but we have already seen that justice is related to love” (ibid.). Niebuhr is done with the *dialysis* and *paralysis* is on the way:

Thus there is a dialectical relation between love and law even as there is between love beyond law and love as law. It might be stated as follows: The law seeks for a tolerable harmony of life with life, sin presupposed. It is, therefore, an approximation of the law of love on the one hand and an instrument of love on the other hand. Consequently the distinction between law and love is less absolute and more dialectical than conceived in either Catholic or Reformation thought. (ibid., 171-2)

So you see dear Phaedrus, dear Pausanias, Eryximachus and Aristophanes, dear Agathon and Alcibiades, dear Catholics and dearly beloved Protestants, your thoughts on the nature of love weren't quite right. Of course they weren't entirely wrong either; it's just that love is a more complex term than was first assumed.

Justice: Proximate Solutions to Insoluble Problems

Human nature is, in short, a realm of infinite possibilities of good and evil because of the character of human freedom. The love that is the law of its nature is a boundless self-giving. The sin that corrupts its life is a boundless assertion of the self. Between these two forces all kinds of *ad hoc* restraints may be elaborated and defined. We may call this natural law. But we had better realize how very tentative it is. Otherwise we shall merely sanction some traditional relation between myself and my fellow man as a 'just' relation, and quiet the voice of conscience which speaks to me of higher possibilities. What is more, we may stabilize sin and make it institutional; for it will be discovered invariably that my definition of justice guarantees certain advantages to myself to which I have no absolute right, but with which I have been invested by the accidents of history and the contingencies of nature and which the 'old Adam' in me is only too happy to transmute into absolute rights.

—R. Niebuhr, “Christian Faith and Natural Law”

Agape love and justice are both prone to conceptual and definitional abuse in the public sphere. Agape love gets abused when it's used as an absolute moral guide in the realm of politics on the one hand, and on the other hand, when it is used as only a personal ideal that has no bearing whatsoever on the laws that order our collective activities. In contrast to

these two errors, justice is abused differently. Justice is never in danger of being considered either completely irrelevant. Sometimes it is wrongly used to define the highest moral standards, as when the “oughts” of laws become our highest measure of ethical action. More often however, sense love is the law of life and the latter abuse, upon close examination, is seen to be only a theoretical abuse, the abuse of the justice ideal takes place when an actualization of justice is considered or professed to be justice’s perfect and final form. What is often thought to be natural, normative, universal, or absolute, is always tainted by the self-interests of those who profess it to be absolute. “Every appeal to moral standards thus denigrates into a moral justification of the self against the enemy. Parties to a dispute inevitably make themselves judges over it and thus fall into the sin of pretending to be God” (*ICE*, 77). In other words, justice, truth, equality, freedom, are always *our* justice, truth, equality, or freedom. A substantial portion of Niebuhr’s writings was spent critiquing the various relative claims of justice from the standard of both its own absolute ideal, and its higher order ideal, agape love.

“Justice,” Niebuhr argues, “requires discriminate judgments between conflicting claims” (*J&M*, 28). Ethical judges will be more critical of their own claims than the claims of the other, though it will not dismiss its own claims out of hand. Niebuhr argues that without this self-criticism “all justice becomes corrupted into a refined form of self-seeking.” On the other hand, he counters, if the claims of the individual or collective self are not considered as well, there can be no justice at all. Though an “ecstatic form of agape” may propel one to reach ultimate heroic moral achievements (like say, martyrdom), no such ecstatic form can define the “common possibilities of tolerable harmony of life with life.” Niebuhr summarizes the situation aphoristically: “In so far as justice admits the claims of

the self, it is something less than love. Yet it cannot exist without love and remain justice. For without the 'grace' of love, justice always denigrates into something less than justice" (ibid.). Justice requires, in other words, that the interest of the self be entertained and resisted.

When faced with conflicting claims, we typically want the world to be black and white, cut and dry, yay or nay. We reach into our conceptual grab bag and look for something that, like a rulebook, that will just tell us what to do. But this can never be the case according to the Niebuhrian perspective, if one desires a just and loving society. It may be possible, at times, between one man and another; but justice becomes more complex because it must arbitrate between the claims of various "others," i.e. between my family and my nation, between my nation and another nation, between one segment of my community and another. This is why the pulpit is often so boring and irrelevant to "the practical man of affairs" who often has a more precise sense of justice, acquired by "feeling his way through the endless relativities of human relations" (ibid., 28). "Practical experience," Niebuhr argues, "has made them sensitive to the complex web of values and interests in which human decisions are reached, while the professional teachers of religion and morals deal with simple counters of black and white". This man may be morally heedless and confuse his own collective self-interest for some selfless virtue, as when a conservative politician, who is also a business man, claims that cutting taxes will lead to national economic prosperity (Factually speaking, this economic hypothesis may be correct, mind you; we are only concerned here with the capitalist's self-interest in the matter, and how he hides this self-interest behind "the common good"). On the other hand, the man may be well schooled in justice and would thus have no reason to listen to a preacher who

only confuses the issues by making “moral distinctions which do not fit the complexities of life” (ibid., 29).

Niebuhr insists that “the realm of justice” is a “realm of tragic choices, which are seldom envisaged in a type of idealism in which all choices are regarded as simple” (ibid.). There are times when we must choose a larger good over a smaller one, “without the hope that the smaller one will be preserved in the larger one.” We may, for example, be forced to choose equality at the cost of freedom or freedom at the cost of equality. There are other times where we must “risk a terrible evil,” Niebuhr argues, “in the hope of avoiding an imminent peril (such as subjugation to tyranny).” Israel’s analysis of the Iranian situation may suffice as a modern example, while also serve as a lesson in the relativity of all justice; for though every democratic country may view Iran as a potential threat, only Israel views such a threat as imminent, because only Israel is directly threatened by their nuclear program. There is never a guarantee that our choices will be the right ones. Niebuhr acknowledges that “Subsequent events may prove the risk to have been futile and the choice to have been wrong.” If there is a world left after such a tragic choice, or at least “enough of a world,” the idealists who remain will accuse the realists of making the wrong choice; though they only remain, saved from tyranny, because the tragic choice was made.

Justice demonstrates another paradox of ethics, and that is the simple fact that the highest result of ethical action can never be its desired result; “It must be its byproduct” Niebuhr argues (ibid., 31). If gaining the self is the only motive for losing oneself in love, one will not have gained anything. Likewise, if justice is the goal one seeks because equality is the thing one aims at, one is left with rigid self-interested claims that are in a continuous battle with one another. If one aims at love, however, one will likely end up somewhere

around justice, as those who marched with Dr. King might attest. Additionally, we may say that if one aims only at love of men, one will come up against those who do not qualify. In order to love all men, one must love the ultimate idea of agape love, its harmonious source of existence and order. We may sum up the situation as such: by loving God, man is able to love all men; by loving all men, man is able to achieve a more ethical and uninterested justice; by seeking a loving justice, one is able to achieve a tolerable harmony between selfish claims of competing wills.

This is what Niebuhr means we writes that Justice “that is only justice is less than justice” (ibid., 32). Niebuhr word for justice that is more than justice is “imaginative justice.” He writes, “Only imaginative justice, that is, love that begins by espousing the rights of the other rather than the self, can achieve a modicum of fairness.” This then, is the unattainable ideal of agape as well; for Niebuhr notes that any “attempt to follow this ideal in a world that is, particularly in its group relationships, hardly human and certainly not divine,” leads inevitably where it led Jesus—“to the cross” (ibid., 33). This type of ethic may be useful but it isn’t the way to achieve social justice.

The struggle for social justice must violate the pure ethic of love because it is a battle between competing assertions of rights and it demands the use of coercion. There is no possibility of a society simply giving up its self-interests for those of another. Imagine, for example, if the US foreign policy shifted tomorrow and the president addressed the nation by stating that in the spirit of love and self-sacrifice, we’ve decided that all of the nation’s oil supply is going to be sold to China and the proceeds are going to be used to feed starving children in India and Africa. Likewise, there is no possibility of a social struggle without coercion, which also violates the pure ethic of agape. Yet, if we are to stay in society,

Niebuhr argues, we must participate in these struggles. He writes, "Neutrality in a social struggle between entrenched and advancing social classes really means alliance with the entrenched position. In the social struggle we are either on the side of privilege or need. No ethical perfectionism can save us from that choice" (ibid., 40).

The struggle for justice can be observed in both "punitive" and "distributive" modes of justice. Distributive justice stands under a principle of criticism that is "equality." Niebuhr calls equality a "rational, political version of the law of love" and thus, it also has a measure of transcendence like love (*ICE*, 65). In other words, "It ought to be, but it never will be fully realized." Social prudence, Niebuhr attests, will always qualify equality and even the most equalitarian society will dispense with some special rewards as "inducements to diligence." A rigorous equalitarianism must reach its pinnacle by insisting that these privileges not be passed down from one generation to another, perpetuating their inequalities. Though it will never be actualized as an ideal, equality then stands as a principle of criticism over every scheme of justice and "is a symbol of the principle of love involved in all moral judgments" (ibid., 66). This principle however, doesn't exhaust the possibilities of distributive justice. Consider the fact that we, as a society, have taken a public school system that was built on "equal education for all" and added programs to it for children who are both handicapped and highly gifted. This is what Niebuhr means when he argues that, "imaginative justice leads beyond equality to a consideration of the special needs" of the lives of others (ibid.).

Corrective justice also reveals this same scale of ascending possibilities. "Society," Niebuhr writes, "begins by regulating vengeance and soon advances to the state of substituting public justice for private vengeance" (ibid., 67). What is public justice but the

recognition that an accused person deserves a more disinterested and objective judgment than that which the injured accuser will give him? These modern standards of punitive justice reduce but do not eliminate the element of vengeance in justice. This same logic presses the conception of justice onward, toward the elimination of vengeance all together. "The criminal is recognized to have rights as a human being" in spite of violating society's laws and therefore, modern psychiatry and criminology focus on locating the source of the anti-social conduct in order to correct it. Instead of just punishing criminals, modern man desires to reform them. This logic eventually leads back to the agape commandment, "love your enemies." These more imaginative reformation ideals will never be fully realized, Niebuhr argues, because "genuine forgiveness requires a contrite recognition of the sinfulness of the self," and because collective behavior can never be imaginative enough to assure more than minimal actualizations of the ideal (*ibid.*, 67). What this means, Niebuhr concludes, is that all standards of corrective justice stand somewhere between two poles; they are organically related to primitive vengeance on the one hand, and the ideal of forgiving one another on the other. There are no absolute limits over how much closer justice may edge toward the latter pole. But it is certain, Niebuhr argues, "that every achievement will remain in the realm of approximation" (*ibid.*).

Thus, the struggle for justice reveals both the possibilities and limits of human existence, just as profoundly as does the search for truth reveal these to him (*NDMII*, 244). One might argue, Niebuhr notes, that in some respects it reveals them even more profoundly because unlike the "intellectual quest," the struggle for justice more obviously "engages all human vitalities and powers." We embark on this struggle because we are obligated to build and perfect our communities, not only because community is a necessary

establishment for order and harmonious existences, but also because man is fulfilled in communal life. Niebuhr sums up man's relationship to communities as such: "Love is therefore the primary law of his nature; and brotherhood the fundamental requirement of his social existence (ibid.). We may add one element to this in order to discover why justice requires a struggle, and that is man's freedom and vitality. Man constantly tries to grow his community in breadth and man constantly criticizes his community from a higher ideal. This means that the task of creating a just society and avoiding the chaos of anarchy continually grows broader and broader in scope. "The fence and the boundary line are the symbols of the spirit of justice," Niebuhr writes; these "set limits upon each man's interest to prevent one from taking advantage of the other" (ibid., 252). We can see that this harmony is, as Niebuhr calls it, only an approximation of brotherhood; "It is the best possible harmony within the conditions created by human egoism." This harmony we may fairly call, "equality."

According to Niebuhr, when we say "higher justice," we always mean, "more equal justice" (ibid., 254). It is in these discussions where we find one of Niebuhr's favorite terms, "the ideological taint." Those who do not have any always frown upon special privileges and likewise, those who have them are always "uneasy in their conscience about it." Herein lies the ideological taint. In the underprivileged, it manifest itself when they raise the principle of equality to the definitive principle of justice without recognizing the differences of need or of social function make such a demand impossible. In the latter group, the inequality of privilege gets justified as the rewards for an inequality of social function. Niebuhr notes elsewhere that the very need to justify it at all, instead of dismissing the demand for a justification all together, reveals some uneasy conscience in

the privileged. Even if this were not the case, we may note that they will always try to hide the historic fact that those who held their positions of power before them invariably used their social power to get “excessive privileges not required by their function; and certainly not in accord with differences of need” (ibid., 255). What we are left with is a continual cycle, in which one group insist that equality is the absolute norm of society, while the other insists that it is an impossible ideal that can’t be actualized fully; furthermore, this is the very thing that demonstrates the ideological taint present whenever a generally valid principle is applied to a given situation—even when the principle itself should conceptually transcend over partial interests. This means that every structure of justice, according to Niebuhr, is intended to give one group an advantage over another; “or if that is not their intention, it is at least the unvarying consequence” (ibid., 256).

We’ve already discussed the relationship between love and law. The singular individual uses laws, norms and commands to regulate his self-interests in relationship to another’s interests, others’ interests, national interests, and the world’s interests. However, when that individual combines his own interest with another individual’s interest—when the situation is no longer between the one and the many but is between the several and the few, the mass and the mob, capital and labor, nation and nation—we move from the realm of love and law to the realm of law and justice. It is when this happens that “even the most perfect love requires a rational estimate of conflicting needs and interests” (ibid., 248). Justice then, is the organizing principle that systematizes and institutionalizes singular laws. Though it has positive elements, as in those moments where love and law seem to cross paths, it is necessary at all because of its negative nature. Communities will take advantage of each other and they are always more concerned with the weal of their own

than the weal of others. Thus, systems of justice must make hard distinctions between the rights and interests of various members and groups in the community. Yet structures of justice are more than just natural and positive laws, more than “the order of a legal system.” The harmony of communities requires much more than just laws and ordinances (ibid., 257). When we analyze structures of justice, we are looking at the “given tensions and equilibria of life and power, as worked out by the unconscious interactions of social life” and of which, structures of justice are just explicit formulations. In other words, human communities are never mere constructions of conscience or reason, they are more than artifacts; they are also organisms.

This natural element in human communities means that they are “more or less stable or precarious harmonies of human vital capacities.” What this means is that human communities are governed by power (ibid.). This point is crucial if we are to understand Niebuhr’s use of rhetoric as “ethical coercion.” Niebuhr points out that this power is not merely the “coercing and organizing power of government,” but is also the “balance of vitalities and forces in any given social situation.” These are the two elements of communal life, what Niebuhr calls the “central organizing principle and power” and the “equilibrium of power” (ibid.). They are essential and perennial elements in every community organization; furthermore, “no moral or social advance can redeem society from its dependence upon these two principles” (ibid.). These are strong words from Niebuhr, strong enough that we should reflect on them for a moment...

This idea is the guiding principle of Niebuhr’s most famous work *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. In the introduction to that text, Niebuhr starts from this very premise, that “the relations between groups” must always be political, rather than ethical, which means

that the proportion of power that each group possesses, the “coercive factor” in these relationships, will always determine their outcomes more than any rational or moral appraisal of the comparative needs of each group (xxiii). Niebuhr’s ultimate purpose was thus, in *Moral Man* and elsewhere, to find “political methods which will offer the most promise of achieving an ethical social goal for society” (xxiv). These resources would have to do justice to the moral resources and possibilities in human nature, exploiting “every latent moral capacity in man.” Secondly, they must take account of man’s natural limitations, particularly collective man’s limitations. Though Niebuhr’s analysis of the resources would vary over time, it was his conclusions about power and coercion, lessons taught battling Ford for workers’ rights, which he never forgot. Though his analysis of the solution would vary over time—he later lamented his conclusion to *Moral Man*, where he implicitly suggested that the solution lay in Nietzschean-type illusions which could control and manipulate the masses—his solution would always remain, I will show, a deeply rhetorical one that poetically built upon shared myths and dialectic inquiry.

Why is this the “destiny of man”? Why are power and coercion fated to play a power in collective existence? There are two reasons: egoism and the unity of the self. First, man is a sinner. Here, we mean man’s egoism, pride, or self-love. Man tends to regard himself as more important than anyone else. This element is so strong, that no moral or rational *suasion* (we italicize here to foreshadow our final chapter) suffices to restrain one person from taking advantage of another. Secondly, man’s vitality and his reason are unified. The body and mind aren’t split. Man’s natural impulses and his reason are not in conflict. This means that man’s egoistic purposes will be pursued with all the vital resources that his will or his collective-will, may control. Combatting these anti-social purposes requires the full

armament of the resources of social restraints. One will note that not every struggle is characterized by a full onslaught of unified vitality and reason; not every argument ends “below the belt,” if you will. True enough, Niebuhr would agree; but we must note, “in every conflict of interest the possibility of marshalling every possible resource on either side is implied.”³⁷ Niebuhr argues that a superior authority and power subdues most of our conflicts with one another before overt appeals to force or the actual use of force are made, whether violent or non-violent (*MM*, 259). This doesn’t change the fact however, that the calculation of our opponents’ available resources and his calculation of ours, is just as determinative of the struggle’s outcome as anything else involved. We need look no further than the typical bar scuffle to see evidence of Niebuhr’s claim. Whenever a man spins around angrily to see who has stumbled into him and spilt his beer, the size and aggression of the man behind him will be just as determinative of the outcome as anything the two say to one another. This is why Niebuhr argues, “The threat of force, whether by the official and governmental representatives or by the parties to a dispute in a community is a potent instrument in all communal relations.” Usually, even the drunkest man will rationalize or talk himself out of fighting a professional boxer in a bar, no matter how large the grievance.

When one group increases the possibility of forceful resistance, it increases the prospect of a solution without the use of force. This is the essence of a nuclear arms race and it is also at the center of the debate concerning president Obama’s Iran policy, i.e. it is felt by some that his statements about Iran are too soft and that Iran is not persuaded he will actually use the military to stop their acquisition of nuclear capabilities. Obama is likewise forced to balance the need to be threatening with the desire to not back them into

³⁷ Arendt calls “power” that which keeps the public realm, “the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men,” in existence. See: (2005)

a corner and make them lash out. Thus, if the large man in the bar keeps coming toward the small man and then he raises his fist, his meager intention to scare the little man may backfire, and he may get struck with a pool cue—an obvious miscalculation regarding the little man’s “available resources” being made on the part of the big man. Anyway, the point is that “the rational calculation of the powers and vitalities, involved in a social situation,” is “an inevitable accompaniment of the rational calculation of rights and interests, involved in a socio-moral problem” (ibid., 260). It is a mere coincidence of history that the few world powers with nuclear weapons are, today, the only powers allowed to protect themselves to the best of their abilities. In other words, Iran doesn’t have the right to defend itself with nuclear weapons simply because they don’t already have a nuclear weapon to use in their fight for that right. Any such sanctions against the US would of course be in vain for the inverse reason.

Now that we’ve seen how man’s community life is ruled by matters of justice, and that justice is ruled by a principle of equality, which comes from the balance of two forms of power—the organizations of power and equilibria of social power—let us now turn to the different types of power in social life.

Conclusion

I think I have solved the Sunday night service problem for good. I give a short address or sermon upon a more or less controversial moral issue, or upon a perplexing religious question, and after closing the service we have a half-hour to forty-five minutes of discussion... I am absolutely convinced that such discussions come to grips with life’s real problems much more thoroughly than any ex cathedra utterance from the pulpit. For one thing the people themselves make the application of general principles to specific experiences. Then, too, they inevitably explore the qualifications which life seems to make upon every seemingly absolute principle.

—R. Niebuhr, *Leaves*

Niebuhr calls attention to the dialectical aspect of these Sunday night discussions in his journal entry. "Again and again," Niebuhr recorded in his journal, "thoughtful mothers have thrown light upon the problems of democracy, the place of coercion in life and the efficacy of trust out of experience gained in their work with children" (*Leaves*, 116-7). Niebuhr found the dialectical aspects of these discussions to be their most interesting characteristic, noting his fascination with the way "every type of experience could be used to illustrate a general truth" (*ibid*). If only there were more thoughtful people like these, he lamented... "But discussion requires time and it doesn't mean much to people who are looking for 'inspiration' rather than guidance." Niebuhr concludes:

I suppose there is still a place for inspirational addresses. But in a world in which so many traditional moral ideas are in solution and so many others are generally accepted and never applied, this kind of honest searching *with* others, rather than *for* them, is particularly rewarding. (*ibid*.)

Niebuhr's reflection is a characteristically rhetorical one. How do universal ideas impact our world? What happens when: The universal clashes with the contingent? When permanent truths, transcendent ideals and crises collide into a demand for a situated judgment? When the time for telling stories and discussing ideas has come and gone? When *kairos* comes profanely crashing through the front doors of our sacred house of worship and our hallowed halls of academia?

Appearances are the beginning of all inquiry. They do not come to us the same way every time; as Farrell notes, "there are multiple sorts of 'truths' and relationships in the world of phenomena" (1993, 25). This means that there must be multiple ways of approaching these appearances, depending on *how* they appear. Analytic, we've said, is the "systematic form of inquiry... concerned with the grammatical relations among subjects

and predicates.” Farrell uses the example of an eclipse; it is, “the privation of the moon’s light by the interposition of the earth.” The second method of inquiry made up the substance of our previous chapter, *dialectic*. Dialectic, as a mode of inquiry (*not* Hegelian dialectics) is characterized by “dichotomous relationships among general propositions linked by question and answer.” Like analytic, dialectic leaves us with a “gap in the world of appearances” (ibid., 25). Thus, Aristotle offers us *rhetoric* as a third way to attend to appearances. Rhetoric gives appearances a sense of duration, “an existence that is likely to persist beyond our current attention span” (ibid., 32). Rhetoric articulates the “mood” of appearances, e.g. the appearances as *necessity*, *possibility*, and *contingency*. Rhetoric begins with the interpretations of appearances articulated in the interested common opinions. It reconsiders the appearances as signs, probabilities and examples, making them the material of public argument (ibid.). As such, the appearances seem to take on a life of their own, becoming agents themselves that invite participatory responses. This means that the audience becomes an agent of change, for when rhetoric reconfigures appearances as invitations to participate, an ethical possibility emerges; not only an ethical possibility, however, but also an aesthetic one.

The reason for the aesthetic dimension of these appearances is, according to Niebuhr, that the “realm of justice is also a realm of tragic choices, which are seldom envisaged in a type of idealism in which all choices are regarded as simple” (*L&J*, 29). Justice is where choices are made between two goods or two evils, for “sometimes we must risk a terrible evil (such as atomic war) in the hope of avoiding imminent peril (such as subjugation to tyranny.” The tragic character of these moral choices, Niebuhr notes, the contradiction between various equal values of our devotion, and the incompleteness of our

moral striving, prove that in this life, if we merely *hope* and *dream* of Christ and the kingdom of God, then “we are of all men most miserable.” “No possible historic justice is sufferable without Christian hope. But any illusion of a world of perfect love without these imperfect harmonies of justice must ultimately turn the dream of love into a nightmare of tyranny and injustice” (ibid., 29). It is with this conclusion that can turn to what I argue is Niebuhr’s solution for these problems: Reinhold Niebuhr’s Christian ethics of rhetoric—grammatically substituted, it is synonymous with Reinhold Niebuhr’s “mythically informed, dialectically discriminating, just and loving attitude, embodied in a symbolic response to collective and contingent appearances.”

Chapter 4 A Christian Ethics of Rhetoric

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.

—Exodus 3:1-2

Appearances come to us in all shapes and sizes, at the most unexpected times and in the most unexpected places. They aren't mere sensorial perceptions or experiences.

Phainomena call out to us from the everydayness of trudge and toil; they speak to us; they demand something from us; we must attend to them. So it was for Moses, who is still today, over three thousand years later, a profitable and renewable model for contemporary social-movement leaders. Moses, who was once a Hebrew baby floating down the Nile river in a basket, once the crown-prince of Egypt, once a fugitive banished from Egypt after murdering an Egyptian slave-driver, is now a shepherd tending his in-law's cattle. He comes across a bush that looks as if it is burning, yet not burning-up and he says to his himself: "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up" (Exodus 3:3). Moses is attentive to the new appearance and thus, he undertakes an analytic inquiry; he desires to know the cause and effect of this natural phenomenon.

The story continues: "When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" This appearance was more than Moses bargained for; not only was it violating the laws of nature, it was now speaking audibly. Yet, Moses attends to it; he is perceptive *and* he is open to new possibilities. Moses responds, "Here I am." He doesn't run out of fear. He doesn't dismiss the voice by either subsuming it dogmatically into previous categorical interpretations—"That must be the wind"—or by

retreating from the appearance into the depths of his consciousness—"I must be losing my mind;" Moses is available for newness. He doesn't assume that the laws of nature are inviolable or that what *was*, is bound to remain what *is*; Moses has a pluralistic approach to the world of appearances.

Since Moses has inquired into this new appearance and demonstrated that he is attentive to it, a dialogue becomes possible; so the bush that is God speaks: "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground...I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Verse 6 tells us Moses's response: "Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God." The status of Moses's inquiry has just changed dramatically, for he has discovered that this appearance is beyond the realm of subject-predicate analysis. Here, we are in the realm of mythos. The voice has just linked itself to all of Hebrew history. This God is the God of Moses's people, their tradition, their past, and their blood.

This mythic God of the Hebrews declares to Moses that he has plans to free the Israelites and that he, Moses, will be the instrumental leader of this rebellion. Moses argues with God and the conversation isn't one-sided. Moses worries that the Israelites will want more than a mythic narrative: "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" (3:14). The profundity of God's response cannot be overstated. It was a radical one, in every sense of the word "radical." His answer marks the historical transition from polytheism to monotheism. God says to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" Just like that, we've move from the realm of mythos to the realm of definition, universals, *names*.

Moses has other concerns now. He worries the Egyptians won't believe him and he insists that his ability to speak in public is poor at best; he is slow of tongue and slow of speech. Thus, a rhetorical inquiry begins; what is the best course of action to proceed with? The definitions of universals impact the contingencies of rhetorical appearances; they are important factors in choosing the right course of action. Moses doesn't yet understand that since the *essence* of this God is "I AM" it means the *essence* of Moses is "I AM's VOICE." Thus, when Moses objects, the definition of the appearance comes again to the forefront: "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak." Having traversed through the analytic, mythic, and dialectic aspects of this narrative, we arrive at the time for rhetorical inquiry. What is the best course of action to achieve the ends in view?

Moses makes a final plea: "O my Lord, please send someone else." The call to ethical action is a burdensome one. The right thing to do and the hard thing to do are almost always the same. It isn't a stretch to say that part of the problem was that Moses was removed from the appearance of the Israelite suffering. As a slave in Egypt he had been compelled to ethical action by killing a soldier who had hurt an elderly slave woman. But hear, up in the mountains with his sheep, they were out of sigh and out of mind. Thus, the ethical impetus for action wasn't stirred in Moses' bones. This brings us back to the beginning of the story. Eliade reminds us that myths are paradigmatic models for human action. This is double-layered in this first social movement narrative. Moses is the paradigmatic model for social leaders today. However, we should note that Moses is enacting the paradigmatic model of God's action as well. Just as we love all mankind

because God loves them, so too we pay attention to appearances because God pays attention to them. After God tells Moses who He is, he continues:

I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey... the cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt. (Exodus 3:7-10)

We should pay attention to appearances because God pays attention to appearances. He sees misery, He hears lamentations, and He *knows* their *pathos*. Not only does He pay attention to their appearances but he addresses the subject predicate relationships as well—I *see* how the *Egyptians* oppress them. First an appearance, then an analysis of cause and effect, then a feeling of ethical contingency by way of a dialectical evaluation (that *is* oppression), then judgment and action—the solution is to bring the people out of Egypt and the means to do it are to send you to speak on my behalf.

God's response to appearances is a model for Moses's response to appearances, and Moses's response, as a mythic narrative, is a paradigmatic model for how the Judaic-Christian tradition, and those that borrow from it, respond to appearances as well. If we could qualify this cycle of inquiry with an adjective, God and Moses's model inquiries, used by leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., it would have to be the adjective "ethical." We can proceed from that shared opinion and ask what we would have to remove from the model that would make us remove this adjective as well. Clearly, analytic, mythic, and dialectics aren't enough. It is easy to jump ahead to the final action and make the intervention into the situation, the actual praxis of social change, the ethical qualifier; but that holds true only in so far as we give more weight to the external goods of action in the here and now. What I want to argue here, is that the rhetorical aspects of God's argument with himself,

demonstrated in his speech to Moses regarding how he came to this decision, and that Moses's argument with God, were precursors to the actual "public" rhetoric of the social movement; and that these precursors were a communal practice between God and himself, and God and Moses, that contain internal goods to the practice itself. This is the model of rhetorical inquiry that Reinhold Niebuhr gives us. That this is the case will be demonstrated by looking at Niebuhr's formulation of prophetic rhetoric as a unique ethical practice and aesthetic response to appearances. To do this, we must first lay out exactly what we mean by rhetoric, for it is, if nothing else, a highly contested term.

Rhetoric: Attending to Appearances Collectively, Ethically, and Aesthetically

Our understanding of how Niebuhr views the relationship between rhetoric and ethics is dependent upon our theory of rhetoric. We must, I argue, begin with a theory of rhetoric that starts with appearances, for analysis to maintain integrity with Niebuhr's worldview, while at the same time drawing out its implications in a unique way.³⁸

³⁸ Any review of the literature on rhetoric is bound to be inadequate. The term is so contested that perhaps the best we can do is highlight some of the major themes and strands of thought in the long and tumultuous history of rhetoric. The following is a brief summary of the more thorough examination of the history of rhetorical theory presented in: (Grey 2011) The Greeks conducted the first systematic studies of rhetoric. Sappho said that persuasion, Aphrodite's daughter, was the one who "beguiled our mortal hearts." Plato noted that rhetoric was "the art of enchanting the soul." Aristotle agreed with Plato: rhetoric was indeed an art, a *techne*; he added however, it was also "the faculty of discovering in any particular case all of the available means of persuasion," thus making it a "potential for doing, a power in its nascent stage," a *dynamis*. The Romans didn't move too far past the Greeks in their investigations; much of what they knew they translated from Aristotle and their contributions weren't necessarily unique, as much as they were more contemporary. Cicero argued that rhetoric was simply "speech designed to persuade" and that as an art, it could be broken down into five lesser arts: "invention, disposition, elocution, memoria, and pronunciation." Quintilian argued "Oratory is the power of judging and discoursing on civil matters that are put before it with certain persuasiveness, action of the body, and delivery." During medieval times Augustine argued that noble rhetoric was

concerned with spreading the word of God and that every such treatment of Scripture depended on two things: “the means of discovering what the thought may be, and the means of expressing what the thought it.” Augustine thereby made explicit the critical, interpretive, hermeneutical task of the preacher-rhetor, which is still used in pulpits today. Bacon’s definition may have been the most poignant to come out of the Renaissance and I would suggest, though only as a loose hypothesis, that it is the most succinct summary of both St. Paul’s and Reinhold Niebuhr’s unarticulated rhetorical theories. Bacon writes, “The duty and office of Rhetoric is to apply Reason to Imagination for the better moving of the will.” Like every period before it and every period after it, the Enlightenment too brought both positive and negative summations of the art. Vico argued that eloquence is, in effect, “wisdom, ornately and copiously delivered in words appropriate to the common opinion of mankind;” while Locke argued that rhetoric was “that powerful instrument of error and deceit.” A.N. Whitehead, standing at the precipice of modernity, emphasized the more democratic functions of rhetoric in his reinterpretation of the Greeks; he writes, “The creation of the world—said Plato—is the victory of persuasion over force. The worth of men consists in their liability to persuasion”—thereby condemning current day politicians on both the left and right sides of the aisle. Kenneth Burke, by almost any standard one can use to measure such things, was modernity’s the most influential rhetorical theorist. No one, perhaps since Aristotle, has added more to our understanding of the artistic aspects of the rhetorical form. Drawing from the works of Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx, Burke wrestled rhetoric from Plato by turning him on his head, arguing that rhetoric was everywhere, even in the discourses of experts who used rhetoric to debunk rhetoric. Burke argued that the best approach to rhetoric was a dramatic one because language was essentially “symbolic action.” It is man’s nature to respond to symbols, Burke argued, and rhetoric was essentially the organization of these symbols as a means to achieve cooperative action. As Grey notes, Burke would famously anticipate the Holocaust by studying Hitler’s rhetoric, “finding in it an identification/separation dynamic that anticipated the attempt to purify German culture” (12). Richard Weaver echoed Burke’s idea of “organizing” when he insisted on rhetoric’s “ordering” aspects. In his brilliantly insightful reading of Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Weaver argued that rhetoric is an “art of emphasis embodying an order of desire.” Thus, rhetoric is given an advisory role; “it has the office of advising men with referent to an independent order of goods and with reference to their particular situation as it relates to these.” Lloyd Bitzer extended these analyses into the first notable, explicitly “constructivist” definition. Rhetoric, for Bitzer, was “a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action.” Robert Scott moves us from reality to truth in his definition: “Man must consider truth not as something fixed and final but as something to be created moment by moment in the circumstances in which he finds himself and with which he must cope.” Rhetoric, Scott insisted, was epistemic; it was a unique “way of knowing.” Once the floodgates of post-modernity were opened, themes of “power” and the commodification of discourse rushed in and imbued the study of rhetoric with a tone of war and violence. Rhetoric became about the rhetorical criticism and linguistic deconstruction of dominant, exclusionary, hegemonic, unfairly legitimized and institutionalized rhetorics. Although it is admittedly reductionist to do so, for time and space constraints, this quote from Foucault serves as an adequate stand-in for the general

Simply stated, appearances matter; in fact, if we've learned nothing else about Niebuhr up to this point, it is that the God of Niebuhr's prophetic religion commands us to care about this world. This means that any theory of rhetoric adequate for our task must begin with the same presupposition. One of the most important aspects of Niebuhr's Christianity was that it was a revealed religion. This is what made appearances matter for Niebuhr. God was in history and Christ entered history, so obviously the appearances of history counted for something.

theme of the period: "In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized, and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off the powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality... discourse is the power which is to be seized." Thus, Foucault greatly expanded the breadth of what is understood as rhetorical by showing how even so-called "objective" or "neutral" discourses were power-laden, persuasive rhetorics. These discourses were used to define individuals and practices as deviant, such as the term "homosexual," demonstrating that rhetoric was one of the primary ways that power is exercised over a group or community. The postmodern critique was damaging to rhetoric, to say the least; and many have argued, after surveying the wreckage, that it was damaging to society. Even those who once sang the praises of science studies, like Bruno Latour, point out that the weapons of post-modernity, like any weapon worth having, are being used against them—as they were used by the Bush administration, in opposition to the political left, to discredit "global warming." Naveh (2002) argues a bit more polemically than Latour. By his estimation, postmodern thinkers invented a new jargon in order to radically challenge prevailing concepts and methods, and they "purposefully obscured distinct analytical tools and common methods of interpretation" (277). Transgressing disciplinary lines and blurring the boundaries between text and context, subject and object, event and representation, form and content, knowledge and language, reality and virtual reality, fact and imagination, ideas and politics, these thinkers "endorsed and even increased cultural anarchy by challenging the meaning, coherence, validity, and transparency of the human experience." They did fight hegemonic discourse, and in doing so, they admitted that human relationships were essentially political, power relations. However, their new vocabularies made their new interpretations even more obscure, and negations of any meaningful anchors led them to "embrace moral relativism and epistemological chaos" (279).

This means that both Socratic and Platonic theories of rhetoric will be found wanting for our tasks.³⁹ A sophistic rhetorical theory that starts with the assumption that man is the measure of all things is inadequate. Niebuhr argues that man is the measure of all political things, but he is hardly the standard for agape love or perfect justice because his love and justice are always *his* love and justice. Even if Protagoras' argument were merely an exercise in *dissoi logoi*, this irreverent playfulness with language and truth would be anathema to Niebuhr's more "reverent agnosticism." Appearances mattered for Niebuhr, but they weren't *all* that mattered; or we might say, to use Niebuhr's own terms, they didn't matter "ultimately." However, any theory of rhetoric that begins with the assumption that appearances are insignificant is equally unhelpful. Here we find Plato's belief that "form, the ultimate meaningful essence of a thing's identity, was absolutely, timelessly real" and thus, "it followed of necessity that all objects of social appearance could only be shadows, illusions of this more profound, hidden truth." All art then, including the *techne* of rhetoric, was merely the practice of inventing appearances—an imitation of an imitation—twice removed from its true nature. Rhetoric then, just as the other arts, was not just to be critiqued and discounted as failing to do justice to the beautiful, the good, and the true; it was, as Farrell notes, to be "banished from the kingdom of the ideal."

Plato's frustrations were justified. "The Homeric spell of mythos" was taking over Greek culture; poetry hypnotically mesmerized citizens, rhetoric poisoned the soul and lied to the Greek polis, manipulating both sight and sound through pleasing images. In other

³⁹ Though some have problematized and reread both the Sophists and Platonic traditions, allowing for some consideration of appearances, these counter-readings are not yet mainstream; regardless, the effort required to "stretch" these theories here would be inefficient and unnecessary.

words, Plato's frustration with the arts, specifically rhetoric, was that they did their jobs too well. Rhetoric worked. Had it not worked, he could have easily ignored it. From Niebuhr's perspective, Plato's first mistake was making rational coherency, instead of *phronesis*, the standard for judgments about truth. Plato didn't have to follow the logic through; he didn't have to insist that *if* those things that don't appear are true, *then* those things that appear are false. He could have, as Niebuhr did, said "both/and." Secondly, Niebuhr would have insisted that rhetoric, as an art, requires imagination and creation, and since it is man who does the imagining and creating—man who transmutes his will-to-live in to a will-to-power—it is inevitable that every art is "both/and" as well: both good and evil, both creative and destructive, both just and unjust. As it happens, we've a theory of rhetoric that articulates something very akin to Niebuhr's thoughts on these matters, which instructively accounts for Niebuhr's ethics of rhetoric.

Unlike Plato, Aristotle wanted to save appearances; after all, what more is a human being than an appearance and what dignity does it do a man to hate himself? Thus, Aristotle begins book seven of the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

One ought, as with other things, when one has set forth the appearances (*phainomena*), and has gone through the impasses a first time, to bring to light in that way especially all the received opinions (*ta endoxa*) about these experiences, or if not that, then most and the most authoritative of these opinions. For if the difficulties are resolved, and something is left of the received opinions (*endoxa*), it would have been made evident in an adequate way. (1145biii)

According to Nussbaum, Aristotle defined appearance as a "loose and inclusive notion of 'experience,' or the way(s) a human observer sees or 'takes' the world" (Owen, Schofield, and Nussbaum 2006, 244). Appearances for Aristotle were not mere sense perceptions: "*phainomena* must be understood to be our beliefs and interpretations, often as revealed in linguistic usage" (ibid.). For Aristotle, the duty of the true philosopher was to dedicate

oneself to what Nussbaum calls the hard work of “struggling for an unconditional vantage point outside of appearances” insofar as “philosophy is a worthwhile enterprise only if it takes us away from the ‘cave’ and up into the sunlight” (ibid., 258).

Farrell argues that the special contribution of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* is to the idea of an ethical “inquiry.” Aristotle senses that “appearances admit to a tension between their stability and ‘the shifting way in which they appear’” (1993, 27). The world is moving underneath our feet. Farrell describes the process this way:

The particularity of things becomes a provocation. We cannot leave well enough alone. We also disagree about things. We may try to ignore them. We may take issue as regards what they mean. Eventually—perhaps sooner than we wish—we may have to own up to them, make judgments about them, and act on them. (ibid.)

While analytic and dialectic can address stabilized concepts, new and novel appearances come crashing down on us and present us with the characteristic aspect of rhetoric—that is, shared *contingency*. Most of the time we are at home in the world of appearances; if we were not, life would be quite insufferable as every drive to work would make for long and difficult intellectual labor. But when the stakes go up and we have a particular interest in the array of things around us, we aren’t likely to care what the general opinion about it is.

We find Aristotle and Niebuhr sharing an ultimate concern with ethics, not truth *qua* truth; furthermore, we see how this transmutes into a concern with rhetoric. According to Farrell, appearances are vital in rhetoric for a political reason, not an epistemological one—it is precisely rhetorical discourse that “allows this plurality of appearances to be presented, witnessed, regarded, qualified, and subverted by the perspectives of others” (ibid., 283). Aristotle and Niebuhr seem to share a view of politics and appearances that is further evidence by Nussbaum’s summary of Aristotle’s view of *phainomena*. She writes, “This, then—if we may characterize it for ourselves using language not known to Aristotle

himself—is a kind of realism, neither idealism of any sort nor skepticism... a realism that articulates very carefully the limits within which any realism must live” (2006, 246).

Nussbaum sums up Aristotle’s philosophy and at the same time sums up Niebuhr’s approach to appearances as well: “Aristotelian philosophy, then, like (and as a part of) our human nature, exists in a continual oscillation between too much order and disorder, ambition and abandonment, excess and deficiency, the super-human and the merely animal” (ibid., 262). We could just as well substitute Niebuhr’s own dialectical oscillations between: the ideal and the actual, love and justice, transcendence and immanence, detachment and attachment, in the world but not of it.

The Ethics of Rhetorical Inquiry

I am really beginning to like the ministry. I think since I have stopped worrying so much about the intellectual problems of religion and have begun to explore some of its ethical problems there is more of a thrill in preaching. The real meaning of the gospel is in conflict with most of the customs and attitudes of our day at so many places that there is real adventure in the Christian message, even if you only play around with its ideas in a conventional world. 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. And of course ideas may finally lead to action.

—Niebuhr, *Leaves*

This reflection provides us a way into Niebuhr’s rhetorical theories and practices that connect us up with Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. Niebuhr’s many reflections on pulpit rhetoric, much like the one here, rarely focus on a specific exigency pressing down upon the congregation that demanded a specific judgment about an immediate course of action, e.g. “should we march for the autoworkers this coming weekend or should we encourage them to go on strike?” On the contrary, Niebuhr’s rhetorical reflections demonstrate that he didn’t view the rhetorical task of the preacher as that of the statesman or prophet. This

doesn't mean, however, that he didn't view the task as political. Politics was about power relations and ethics for Niebuhr, while statecraft was about policies and legislation.

Niebuhr's task, as he reveals here, was to set the ideals of the gospel into juxtaposition with the goings on of this world, not because it guides us about what to do in terms of policies, but simply because it is "interesting." He notes "ideas may finally lead to action," but he doesn't sound very hopeful here; it almost sounds like the practical value of the rhetorical practice is only an after thought. How can this be? How can rhetoric be conceived in such non-utilitarian terms? Isn't rhetoric about deliberating about pressing matters and the best courses of action? Commemorating heroic lives after they've passed on? Arguing about the relative guilt or innocence of the accused in courtrooms?

The answer to these questions is found in the evolution of rhetorical theory. Rhetoric, in Greek thought, goes from a form of argument about what to do, to an ethical cultural practice with internal goods of virtuous conduct. Farrell traces the history of rhetoric from Protagoras to Isocrates to Aristotle, noting how its ethical components shift with each thinker. Protagoras starts from the assumption that ethics are teachable on empirical grounds. Our public practices presuppose we are capable of recognizing what is right, and of acting in such a way that is virtuous. The facts of our experience say this is so, Protagoras seems to say; were ethics not teachable, then why do people get angry at each other's failings? The conclusion Protagoras' great speech reaches, though it is not without its problems, is significant. The reason everyone can give advice on politics and that everyone can be instructive about virtue, is because the democratic culture starts from the assumption that we are all citizens and that all citizens are capable of civic and rhetorical excellence. Thus, for Protagoras, "our civic and rhetorical conduct is unavoidably ethical in

its significance” Farrell argues (1993, 57). Just as everyone is a teacher of a community’s native language, everyone is a teacher of how to be a good citizen, part of which means, being a noble rhetor.

In Farrell’s analysis of Isocrates *Antidosis*, we find a more realistic analysis of the ethics of the Greek community, though importantly, Isocrates is not a cynic. Isocrates taught great and noble themes, more than hair-splitting dialectics; much in the way that Niebuhr insisted he was a pastor and not a theologian. Just like Niebuhr in Detroit, Isocrates soon realized that his “Great and noble themes and lifelong dedication to the formative art of rhetoric” were not enough (ibid., 59). Among tyrants and abusive policies, Isocrates problem echoes Niebuhr’s: “how to *use* rhetoric to help revitalize its significance as an ethical practice.” Isocrates chooses to ignore the “sycophants” and addresses his solutions to the saving remnant of Greek culture, those “remaining honest persons in Athens who have not been corrupted.” Isocrates writes:

My view of this question is, as it happens, very simple. For since it is not in the nature of man to attain a science by the possession of which we can know positively what we should do or what we should say, in the next resort I hold that man to be wise who is able by his powers of conjecture to arrive generally at the best course. (ibid., 268-72).

Farrell notes that in Isocrates humble vision, “the Good is not implanted in our souls as some prior truth” as it was for Protagoras; nor was it “forever removed from our lives” as it was for Plato. Again, Niebuhr comes roaring forth in Farrell’s summation of Isocrates: “Rather, it is approximated most of the time in our ongoing attempts to do the best we can with what we have” (ibid., 59). No art can help us achieve the ideal. “The kind of art which will implant honesty and justice in depraved natures has never existed and does not now exist,” and anyone who professes such power will grow old and tired before any such art is

found, Isocrates argues. Nevertheless, the art that *best* equips us for these human efforts at approximating the ideal of justice is rhetoric. How does it do this? It is significantly *not* by some didactic method that depends on our ability to persuade one another to do the right thing. Instead, ethical conduct is the *by-product* of rhetorical competence; it is a good intrinsic to the nature of the practice. The true advantage gained from rhetoric is not the short-term advantages of winning an argument, Isocrates insists; it is rather, “the true advantage that comes from taking one’s craft seriously” (ibid., 60). Ethos then, for Isocrates, was not a manipulative component of rhetoric; it was rather the by-product of rhetoric—learn the practice of justification through speech, and you will be justified; master the practice of rhetoric, and virtue will follow (ibid., 61).

This is why Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* is instructive for inquiring into Niebuhr’ view of rhetoric as a “juxtaposing the gospel and the world;” because ideas may, after all, one day, fingers crossed, lead to ethical action. Nowhere does Aristotle state explicitly that the goal of rhetoric is to persuade. Instead, as Farrell argues, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* presents us with rhetoric as a “practice,” specifically a practice in judgment where certain appearances are experienced as problematic (ibid., 94). Drawing on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre⁴⁰, Farrell notes the distinction between goods internal to a practice and those that are external. MacIntyre uses chess as an example of a practice with both internal and external goods. Farrell notes that MacIntyre’s distinction is serviceable for rhetoric provided we remember two things (ibid., 95). First, the internal goods of an activity aren’t necessarily the reason one does the activity. We may recall Niebuhr’s point about the Christian ethic here: if one loses oneself *in order to* find oneself, the agape ethic is self-serving and the

⁴⁰ (MacIntyre 2007)

desired result evades you. Likewise, one can't play chess just in order to learn how to overcome adversity; one plays to capture the enemies King.

Second, the internal goods of a practice are not always "localized within the autonomous agent alone" (ibid., 95). Farrell writes: "There is an unmistakable pedagogical sense in which improved performance by the other improves the quality of play, one's appreciation for the game, and perhaps the resolve of one's opponent" (ibid.). Aristotle's theory, according to Farrell, is that rhetoric is a practice of "relational goods," which requires another person if it is to be practiced and cultivated. Rhetoric, an activity with its own intrinsic goods, is thus a practice—"a coherent, creative activity admitting certain standards of accomplishment. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* demonstrates how rhetoric, as a *community* practice, is an activity with internal standards of excellence that, if achieved, yield ethical conduct (ibid., 62). Rhetoric then, has ethical propensity because it engages the particularity of appearances as contingencies in which the rhetor and audience have a shared interest.

In Aristotle's view, a fully realized noble rhetoric is a *community* practice among those with a certain mutual regard for one another. The "preferred condition of audiences" in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is one of "civic friendship," in which "the partiality of regard is the better part of prudential reason" (ibid.). This means that rhetoric, by Farrell's estimation, "is the principal art responsible for the shape and coloration of public character." It functions as such, when rhetoric is practiced as a *dynamis*, which like virtue, is a nascent capacity for action that will one day be called upon to perform. Practicing rhetoric, in other words, is how a community practices making judgments in crises by seeking out all the available means for persuasion in a given contingency.

The Aesthetics of Rhetorical Reconfiguration: Pathos, Tragedy and Irony

Appearances shared by human beings are *re-presented* in the guise of a practical consciousness, which guides and legitimates collective human conduct. Rhetoric regards appearances as the primary aesthetic material for the continual reinvention of human *agency*, which, in turn, offers some preliminary construal of their ethical possibility.

—Thomas Farrell, *Norms of Rhetorical Culture*

The dynamis of practical reasoning lays dormant until we are faced with “contingency.” Contingency deals with the probable and the uncertain, but it must not be understood in material or logical terms alone. The former places it only in the world of events; yet rhetoric always deals with the movement from “imminent uncertainty of chance and fortune toward the eventual facticity of historical truth” (Farrell 1993, 77). The latter emphasis leaves us with propositions alone; turning rhetoric into a mere form of logos—flawed at best, Farrell notes. If we are to take Niebuhr’s work as rhetorical, then we must acknowledge that neither of these definitions of contingency allow for Niebuhr’s love ideal as an “impossible possibility.” A broader understanding of contingency is necessary.

Originally, Aristotle distinguished contingency from the necessary and the impossible. Contingents were things that were sometimes the case and sometimes not the case. It is something whose truth is “intermittent” (ibid.). We don’t argue about things that never will be or things that will be, regardless. These middle grounds are why rhetoric is required to step in and perform an inquiry and they also show us why rhetoric is an ethical matter. Contingencies swoop into our collective lives as detours and roadblocks in our collective narratives. They are moral problems because we do not yet know which ones will be decisive for our public vindication (ibid., 78). They are rhetorical problems because “the moral weight of appearances is not automatic” and thus, they demand a rhetor to

reconfigure them with the audience (ibid., 49). Contingencies barge into our lives unexpectedly and demand that we make a judgment. The recent narrative construction of Joe Paterno at Penn State University is a reminder for all of us, that the story is still being told and that fifty years of heroic action may be wiped away in a split-second when all is said and done. No one will ever have *all* the facts, nor will it know how the story will be told years after the decision is made, when all the facts are in. This means, that rhetoric has a narrative quality because it must weave all the accounts of the facts into one story; in other words, that rhetoric is an “ongoing narrative construction” of a community with partial interests.

Rhetoric must be a partially interested practice and its norms must be its own community’s norms. This is not, Farrell notes, a judgment against it; but is instead rhetoric’s “aesthetic promise” (ibid., 100). The bottom line is that moral problems arise only from the particularity of agents situated in an incomplete picture (ibid.). Could anything be more evident of such truth than the fact that otherwise “good” kids rioted in the streets of State College when Joe Paterno was fired, while the rest of America watched in horror, pronouncing judgment upon them from outside their community. Rhetoric doesn’t condone either the Penn State student body or the country’s response. Rhetoric simply starts from within those given communities. “Partisanship,” Farrell writes, “an excessive allegiance to locales and persons that are near and dear, is not a bias inherent in rhetoric itself. Rather, it is part of human nature” (ibid.). It is a universal element in all human activity, and lamenting it is a waste of time and energy. Instead, we must address the problem by making the best of the situation, using partisanship as a resource, whenever possible. Farrell concludes:

If larger civic obligations toward the generalized other are to be engendered, we must first see the other in ourselves. To develop such as sense, we need to be drawn out of ourselves. And to enact this phase of moral development, we must employ the only art capable of presenting others to ourselves as both potential victims and potential moral witnesses—that is to say, as audiences. (ibid.)

This means that before one can extend a virtuous eye toward the appearances of others outside our own group, one must first be able to look upon the others within one's own group from an ethical perspective. Rhetoric, for Aristotle, was the method by which this virtue could be trained. The norms of a rhetorical culture begin in the home and move to the community, the church congregation, the city, the state, the nation, and beyond. At each level, the rhetor also changes, for each level requires a different aesthetic reconfiguration according to each audience.

Farrell's summary of Aristotle demonstrates the affinity between Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*, and puts forth reasonable cause for us to think that Aristotle viewed rhetoric as an aesthetic activity. For example, consider the term *krisis*. Crisis in tragic poetry moves us from fear to pity; crisis in rhetorical practice moves us through morally significant emotions as well. National crises usually mark moments of memorable public address: Bobby Kennedy's Indianapolis address after MLK's assassination, Reagan's "Challenger Speech," Lincoln's second inaugural address and Roosevelt's first, are but a few examples. Rhetoric then, not only engages audiences, but also "invents public moods." With this, the twofold nature of rhetoric is revealed. Rhetoric is the *ethical* practice that provides "definition, impetus, and direction to history in the making, even as we wait impatiently for the heroes and the villains to be named later" (ibid., 39). Rhetoric names the heroes and villains before the act of judgment, and in a rhetorical culture, it continually amends the

narrative by re-naming them in the future, accounting for the new and unexpected appearances of all tomorrow's historical parties.

Traditionally, we conceptualizing appearances aesthetically in one of three ways: pathetically, tragically, or comically. Each of these responses, or "frames of acceptance" are both the consequence and cause of specific attitudes toward history and others. It is the rhetor's task to reconfigure appearances for her audience; in order to prepare our attitudes for her desired actions. Niebuhr writes:

I wonder whether there is any way of being potent oratorically without oversimplifying truth. Or must power always be bought at the expense of truth? Perhaps some simplification of life is justified. Every artist does, after all, obscure some details in order to present others in bolder relief. The religious rhetorician has a right to count himself among, and take his standards from, the artists rather than the scientists. The trouble is that he is usually no better than a cartoonist. (*Leaves*)

Niebuhr's reflection on the ethics of pulpit oratory gives credence to Aristotle's vision for rhetorical practice. It is, on the first hand, an ethical practice that is concerned with truth and conveying this truth to an audience of shared interests. On the second hand, it is an aesthetic practice that must reconfigure appearances into artistic forms if it is to achieve intelligibility on a level deeper than that of raw data, *phainomena*. Aristotle, Farrell notes, "believed that matter achieved intelligibility through form" (1993, 109). Unlike Plato, Aristotle insisted that the aesthetics of recognition affords us another kind of seeing, equally valuable to the seeing of perfect essences that comes from philosophical reflection, and this aesthetic seeing is what provides us with the "pleasure of learning" (*ibid.*, 111). This pleasure is grounded in *mimesis*, according to Aristotle, and comes whenever we experience the "imitation of action" that provides us with a view of our particular contingencies as generalizable and reoccurring forms.

Before one aesthetically reconfigures appearances into forms, one encounters them pathetically, i.e. one *suffers* (*pathos*) them. Rhetorically reconfigured pathos is the method by which one gets others to suffer appearances they haven't suffered. It is, as the traditional prophetic discourse would have it, the *hark! listen!* and *look!* that depends upon an audience that has "ears to hear" and "eyes to see." Thus, it requires an audience characterized by civic friendship, an audience who trusts that the ethos of the orator is a kindred spirit to its own values and goods. The audience is an agency capable of character; they are an audience "*as a capacity*"—a dynamis. Experiencing pathos "as an audience" is never a morally neutral activity, for emotions are always relational. Pathos isn't "trafficking in emotions;" rhetorically configured, it is the double-move that takes us from the awareness of our own emotion (fear), to recognition of what may be involved when others are suffering (ibid., 71). It is rhetoric that allows us to make the move from fear for ourselves to pity for others (71).

Pathos is "that which happens,"⁴¹ and it moves us "because it is that which is essentially the vital force of our human existence."⁴² The pathetic element in a historical drama "elicits pity, but neither deserves admiration nor warrants contrition."⁴³ "Suffering caused by purely natural evil" writes Niebuhr, "is the clearest instance of the purely pathetic" (*IAM*, xxiii). It always leads to self-pity. In the realm of social relationships, pathos, Niebuhr argues, "is constituted of essentially meaningless cross-purposes in life, of capricious confusions of fortune and painful frustrations" (ibid., 166). Niebuhr finds the pathos of historical dramas most explicit in the dialectical tension between individualism

⁴¹ Liddel-Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*.

⁴² F. P. B. Osmaston, trans. *The Philosophy of Fine Arts* (London, 1920), I, 308 f.

⁴³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2008) (1952), xxiii (hereafter cited as *IAM*).

and collectivism. This is because intra-group relationships are political, not ethical; they are maintained by power, force and coercion, the necessary elements for suffering, whether in the realm of nature or politics. Moral or rational suasion are as futile in the pathetic relationships between the US and Al Qaida, as they are futile to stop a hurricane from crashing into the depleted levees of New Orleans. Man's *pathetic* situation is "group immorality," seen at its worst in the relationships between nations, races, and classes. Man is forced to depend upon others for his survival, yet his egoism struggles with cohabitation and conflicting desires.

The prophet, as we've already noted, is first a sufferer. He feels the suffering of his people as God feels it. He suffers with God. Brueggemann notes that this type of prophetic suffering requires the imagination we call "empathy" and the prophet's task is to broaden this feeling of suffering in order to stir the souls of those he will need to follow him.⁴⁴ The prophets, best exemplified in this aspect by Jeremiah, were elicitors of collective grief. Grief and tears, argues Brueggemann, combats the numbness—in Niebuhr's words the "social inertia" of the status quo—created by the dominant culture of injustice. A realistic survey of the human condition leads to a feeling of desperation and sadness. The feeling of pity is often paralyzing. The pathetic element in our history can be seen in a flood that causes mass destruction *or* in the human condition of limited rationality and excessive egoism. To acknowledge the pathetic aspects, however, doesn't mean we must give in to hopelessness or retreat in asceticism; the show must go on—the levees need rebuilding and the will-to-power of terrorist organizations must be dealt with head-on, if the surviving remnant is to

⁴⁴ For more on this see Abraham Heschel's "The Philosophy of Pathos" in *The Prophets* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2009) (1962) pp. 27-47. Heschel problematizes traditional notions of pathos and their inability to define a prophetic understanding of the relationship between reason and emotion.

face the future without fear. Abiding in the pathetic leads to depression and feelings of desperation and helplessness. In order to accomplish social justice in human affairs, one must leave self-pity and abide in the world of judgment, which is always a potentially tragic one.

The highest form of aesthetic reconfiguration, for Aristotle, was tragedy. Tragedy's nobler characters and actions, its bigger issues and greater virtues and vices, create tensions and reversals, which "enlarge life's panorama" (Farrell 1993, 113). Its form is also grander than all forms, according to Farrell, because it contains that fateful character *necessity*, instead of those "less formally pure relationships" of contingency, probability, possibility, and chance (ibid.). Lastly, we should note that tragedy is bound to define appearances that have come and gone. We, as readers of a tragic play, see all the elements involved and know the play is heading for a tragic ending. However, as actors in history, the summary of a scenario as tragic is left for those who survey the destruction, and this is the observant view of the prophet's prospective. Their task is to stand outside of history and reconfigure past appearances as tragic in order to spur that emotional catharsis in an audience that is needed in the wake of disasters, or to reconfigure present appearances in order to warn us that we are currently in a dramatic tragedy.

Tragedy elicits pity *and* admiration because it combines "nobility with guilt."⁴⁵ When a government, society, community, or individual become so fanatical with illusions of perfection, progress, and utopia; when symbolic motivation elicits violence and immorality beyond reasonable limits; the tragedy of human history narrates the account. Niebuhr's prophetic nature is wrapped up in the fear that one day a poet will author a similar tale

⁴⁵ Niebuhr, *Irony*, xxiv.

about America. Writing in 1952, Niebuhr sees the tragic element exemplified in America by “the threat of atomic destruction as an instrument for the preservation of peace” (*IAM*, xxiii). Just as Prometheus sought to master nature in defiance of Zeus, man harnessed the atom in defiance of nature. This story leads Niebuhr to conclude, regarding the US involvement in World War II: “The democracies may still have enough power to win a war in which they are involving themselves by trying to avoid it. But they certainly will make the catastrophe of war more inevitable by their effort to escape it” (*BT*). This tragic perspective is limited because it introduces the idea of necessity and fate; actions seem to be running along their own course, refusing interventions that may interrupt their seeming inevitability. Burke notes that the tragic acceptance of these consequences is similar to that of the logic of scientific cogency, as the events of tragedy seem to grow out of one another (1984, 39). Tragedy presents us with a world that is much like a chemical reaction, in that once the elements have come together, the reaction is going to have necessary, fated consequences, ruled by the laws of nature, which no man can stop.

The third response to appearances is the comic one. Humor is our way of accepting appearances that seem incongruous. Whereas tragedy accepts the world as fated and ruled by certain laws—the most notable, in both Greek and Christian frames being, “pride comes before a fall”—the world of comedy accepts the world as absurd, ruled not by laws but by accidents, ignorance, and the unexpected. Whereas tragic heroes are framed as guilty, vicious, and villainous, comic victims are understood as stupid, mistaken, fools. This is, according to Burke, the highest pinnacle of human progress; we can go no further than to picture people, not as vicious, but as mistaken (1984, 41). In this way, the comic frame returns to the lesson of the tragic one—humility. Tragedy warns man that only humility

can save one from the fate of *hubris* and comedy helps create the proffered attitude of humility by emphasizing that we are less intelligent, aware, and knowledgeable than we think. It is a comic fact that every insight contains its own special kind of blindness; it is a tragic fact that we prefer to think this comic fact is not the case. The fusion of these two statements is what leads us to the final framing device, dramatic irony, which comes only into play for the spectators of history, i.e. the prophets. It is this device, we will see momentarily, which leads to the prophet's rhetoric of aspiration, his capacity to goad man to seek perfection, beyond the tragedy that comes whenever he seeks perfection.

To summarize, we note that appearances present us with a scene in which we participate (Farrell 1993, 30). Though we can't freeze these scenes in time, as we can a photograph, their more compelling features tend to stabilize and "arrest the unfolding tendencies of events and hold our attention." Appearances, in their natural form, as raw data, come to us with tone, aura, aspect and texture and wait to be reconfigured poetically by the aesthetically sensitive rhetor. *Aspect*, Farrell notes, refers to those visual features of appearance that seem to call out to the community, standing out from the background and imposing themselves on us (ibid.). "We wait for the hostages to descend from the plane," Farrell argues, and then "*There they are!*" Out of contrast, discovered irony, and dramatic tensions, these appearances' particular elements will stand out, while others necessarily then recede into the backdrop. The result is that the appearances, aesthetically reconfigured, become like shadowy illusions of the raw data of phenomena. As with everything then, these rhetorical reconfigurations may be used rightly or wrongly.

Prophetic Ethos and Pathos: Niebuhr's Response to Appearances

One of the most fruitful sources of self-deception in the ministry is the proclamation of great ideals and principles without any clue to their relation to the controversial issues of the day. The minister feels very heroic in uttering the ideals because he knows that some rather dangerous immediate consequences are involved in their application. But he doesn't make the application clear, and those who hear his words are either *unable to see the immediate issue involved* or they are unconsciously grateful to the preacher for not belaboring *a contemporaneous issue which they know to be involved but would rather not face*.

—R. Niebuhr, *Leaves*

The italicized points of emphasis, which I've added to Niebuhr's poignant reflection, couldn't be more profound and applicable to our analysis of rhetorical inquiry. They contain, implicitly, the first and perennially asked question of an ethicist, whether it is Niebuhr, Aristotle, or MacIntyre: Is virtue teachable? The two points of emphasis in this quote start from the assumption that the answer to this overarching question is, yes. In this epigraph we see that Niebuhr formulates the twofold task of teaching ethics. The first task is a matter of *sight*: How do we get an audience to see what needs to be looked at? The second task is a matter of *conscience*: Once they've seen what the prophet sees—that is, injustice, for Niebuhr—how does he get them to address the appearance of injustice in concerted action? On the one hand, the problem is about *getting their attention*; on the other, it is about getting them to *pay attention*. The former requires they look, while the latter requires they do. The former is a necessary prerequisite for ethical action; the latter requires courage and effort—what Bonhoeffer would call the “cost of discipleship,” which was, we note briefly, one's whole life. Thus, Aristotle's vision for rhetoric is a useful framework for understanding Niebuhr's rhetoric as an ethical and aesthetic practice.

The ethical and aesthetic dimensions of Niebuhr's implicit rhetorical theory can be drawn out, for simplicity sake, by quickly gesturing toward the titles of his works. First, we

have the ethical titles: *Does Civilization Need Religion?*, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, *The Contribution of Religion to Social Work*, *Man's Nature and His Communities*, *The Structure of Nations and Empires*, *Christianity and Power Politics*, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, and *Faith and Politics*. These titles show that from the first text, written in 1927, to the last book Niebuhr published in 1963, one theme remained steadfast throughout Niebuhr's career; that theme is "the relationship between individuals and their collectives." If we recall that Niebuhr considered himself, not a theologian, not a political scientist, not a philosopher, but a Christian ethicist; and if we begin with the fairly broad and uncontested notion that, whatever rhetoric is, it definitely plays a significant role in the discourse between individuals and collectives; then we have a good starting point for assuming that Niebuhr's ethics and his rhetoric will be bound to one another.

Only rarely is Niebuhr explicit about the role of rhetoric and ethics, and even then, one will rarely find the word "rhetoric"; one has to dig deep for the linkages. Nevertheless, they are there; for instance, the relationship between rhetoric and ethics comes to the forefront in this passing reflection from *Beyond Tragedy*:

Pure power cannot maintain itself. It must have some measure of moral respect. It must be admitted that pure conscience seldom defeats an unjust social system. Those who speak against its injustice are primarily its victims. Yet slavery would have persisted if only the slaves had recognized its oppression. A moral element thus enters into every successful challenge of Caesar's authority. (285)

In light of this fact, Niebuhr comes to a conclusion—again, in 1937—that may be the most important rhetorical and ethical contribution to United States history. In this book, rated fifth among Niebuhr's works in popularity, according to Amazon.com, Niebuhr articulates the rhetorical theories that twenty years later, Martin Luther King, Jr. would credit as the greatest influence on his own social movement. Niebuhr writes:

...Those who draw their inspiration from Christ's Kingdom must limit themselves to purely moral weapons in contending against historic injustice... The Kingdom of God is relevant to every moment of history as an ideal possibility and as a principle of judgment upon present realities. Sometimes it must be obeyed in defiance of the world, though such obedience means crucifixion and martyrdom. Sometimes courageous obedience forces the evil of the world to yield, thus making a new and higher justice in history possible. Sometimes the law of the Kingdom must be mixed with the forces of nature which operate in the world, to effect at least a partial mitigation of oppression. (ibid., 286)

With these three dramatic scenes, Niebuhr makes the pluralistic point that martyrs, prophets and statesmen may each in their own way be servants of the Kingdom. Obeying the Kingdom in defiance may lead to death. This is the dramatic tale of the martyr. "Without the martyr" Niebuhr argues, "we might live under the illusion that the kingdom of Caesar is the Kingdom of Christ in embryo" forgetting that there is a fundamental contradiction between the two. At other times a dissident individual will rise up and judge the drama as if they were an observer in the balcony. This is the position of the prophet in historical dramas. "Without the successful prophet," Niebuhr argues, "whose moral indictments effect actual changes in the world, we might forget that each moment of human history faces actual and realizable higher possibilities" (ibid). Lastly, there are those actors in the drama who are tasked with passing bills, vetoing legislation, and overthrowing political regimes. This is the heroic role of statesmen, like Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. "Without the statesman, who uses power to correct the injustices of power, we might allow the vision of the Kingdom of Christ to become a luxury of those who can afford to acquiesce in present injustice because they do not suffer from it" (ibid., 286).

There is an important element revealed in these lines that goes far past the power of non-violence and appeals to conscience. The conclusion Niebuhr reaches shows us, not only an actual rhetorical tactic fused with a lived ethic that is used to further the cause of

justice; it also reveals another important aspect of Niebuhr's rhetorical ethics, and that is, how he views rhetorical agents as actors in dramatic historical scenes. Our second observation begs us once more to reflect on some of Niebuhr's titles: *The Self and The Dramas of History*, *Beyond Tragedy*, and *The Irony of American History*. Niebuhr's understanding of social action and communication echoes the one of Kenneth Burke, the patron saint of contemporary rhetorical theory. Rhetorical theorists would not be faulting for crediting Burke with the following lines from Niebuhr's *Self and the Dramas of History*:

The self is engaged in a perpetual dialogue with other selves in which its dependence upon others becomes apparent but which also proves its independence over all relationships. These dialogues create dramatic actions of various kinds... The dialogues may be prompted by casual, or by permanent, relationships with others. While these dialogues represent a dimension of selfhood as a "social animal," they are not in the category of social life as usually defined. They move above the level of social cohesion which may be observed objectively. They are dramatic elaborations of these social cohesions. (30)

Niebuhr understands man's dialogues with the community as dramatic actions and, developing this theme further, he discovers that the community does have some similarities to the individual. Unlike the former titles mentioned, wherein Niebuhr distinguishes individual and community quite sharply from one another; in these "dramatic" themed texts he isn't so sure. Individuals, he argues, like communities, are historical entities who respond to historical events (*SDH*, 39). The memories of these historical events, for both, are significant factors in their unique identities; both express this uniqueness in their devotion to heroes, who embody the particular "genius" of their city, state, or nation; and in their devotion to past events, such as the signing of the declaration of independence. Memories give back to individuals and communities a consistent "spirit." Importantly, Niebuhr notes, though these memories develop into a dramatic historical pattern that may present such a consistency of action that the future courses of action are

necessary or fated, “they never produce a pattern which could become the basis of confident future action” (ibid., 40). Thus, for Niebuhr, the future is always dramatically unfolding in historical patterns; yet, it nevertheless remains open to new possibilities, i.e. tomorrow is always contingent.

In a *New Republic* review of Peter Viereck’s book *Dream and Responsibility* (1953), Niebuhr noted that he shared with Viereck a “distrust of the separation of aesthetics from political and ethical concerns, particularly for high modernists such as Ezra Pound” (Halliwell 2009). Niebuhr argued that the responsible artist should have a keen sense that aesthetics and ethics are always connected, that they partly overlap. It is the artist job to be a non-conformist, he insisted, a “disturber of the peace; yet at the same time the artist must not become too cynical as to cut ties with public life, or become so disillusioned that they resort to nihilism. A “middle way” should be sought, he argued, rejecting both the “uncritical glorification of technics” on the one hand, and the “full-scale romantic rebellion against the realities of a machine civilization” on the other.

However, the middle way was not a compromise, Niebuhr argued; as Martin Halliwell has noted, Niebuhr always preferred a Jamesian “double-jointedness” to the dilution of either thought or practice. It was this very double-jointedness that presents us with two aspects of Niebuhr’s ethics of rhetoric that correspond to two ways of approaching appearances, what Niebuhr called, at times, the “poet-prophet,” and at other times the “spiritualized-technician” or the “prophet-technician.” One is a moral rhetorical response to the appearances of injustices in the present. The other is a dramatic interpretation of appearances that were once present but are now past, i.e. the martyr is not a martyr until he has died. The martyr responds to appearances in the *present*, but is

not honored as a martyr until history recognizes the act as *past* martyrdom. This means that a community must be present who will recognize the dramatic framing of the martyr's sacrifice as a courageous, noble, and moral deed.

The Prophet's People: The Church, the Body of Christ, and Civic Friendship

Aristotle's definition, like Niebuhr's political and ethical thought, requires that we pay attention to how collectives *act* as membership groups. Farrell notes that the very word "act" may strain our thoughts of the collective group because we—scholars that is; particularly communication scholars—typically think of audiences as "targets" or message "consumers" (1993, 96). This turns the audience to a "victim," instead of a group of individuals who are friendly and have shared interests. More than a target or consumer, Farrell notes that Aristotle views the rhetorical audience as "between a public and a constituency—a kind of collaborative agency for making ongoing judgments" (ibid.). Rhetoric generates an atmosphere of civic friendship and in doing so, it cultivates conditions "wherein an audience might accomplish or accommodate goods beyond itself." Additionally, rhetoric envisions a common language of argumentation and a "lexicon of values, wherein civic ideals and ordinary convictions must eventually come together so as to reflect, refine, and extend one another in the unfinished world of the practical" (ibid., 96-7).

This is why, Farrell points out, that Aristotle enumerates so many long lists of the various appearances of different virtues. These enumerations are the "annotations of civic virtue that we must come to terms with in order to ground conduct consistent with the stated aspirations of public life" (ibid.). These *doxa* provide the vocabulary that is essential

for a culture of justification, one that fosters and encourages occasions for collective judgment. These occasions may be utter failures, as they often are; but that is not the point. Farrell insists that what matters is the possibility of agency opened up by rhetorical practice, where collective action is concerned. Character is possible only because it is possible to fail, Farrell notes (ibid.). Rhetoric then, can't guarantee ethical collective conduct; but it always gives the public the *possibility* for moral action.

Aristotle's take on the rhetorical audience departs from modern theories that decry partiality as a component of rhetorical practice. Yet, an understanding of rhetorical cultures that doesn't include partiality, likewise cannot account for one of the most important aspects of Aristotle's vision: the notion of *phronesis* or "practical reason." Of the five virtues, Farrell argues that Phronesis deserves special attention for rhetoric. *Phronesis*, that practical reasoning that is marked as excellent by a kind of "prudence" or "moral insight," Aristotle treats as a virtue. Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Farrell argues, shows us the possibilities for practical reason in a community where there are multiple goods, virtues, and authorities; in so doing, it is our "first sustained exposure to the norms of rhetorical culture." Practical reason reveals the fact that no matter how excellent an individual's moral prudence may be; there are times when it must be shored up by the feedback from a community as we practice the art together. "Where social virtues are concerned" Farrell notes, "it is others who must enact and thus complete the choices available" (1993, 74). Audiences cannot cultivate proper judgment all by themselves. By making one's reasoning public, one makes it relational and practical. Practical reason is how a community addresses the contingency of their shared appearances. Since this reasoning depends upon the agents in a community having a mutual regard for one another, since they are both witnesses to the arguments

and are capable of being persuaded, there is an ethical propensity to rhetoric. In other words, since we all feel these appearances to be pressing matters of concern and we have all gathered in this space to hear arguments about how to address these appearances, we are also inevitably, even if only to a minimal degree, *other-centered* during this activity. But we must note the make-up of this rhetorical audience. Aristotle makes it clear that “not just any *others* will do”; a community of kinship and civic friendship is required for *phronesis* (ibid., 75). In other words, the audience is made up of other Greeks alone and the interests of those outside Greece, whether citizens or gods, is of no concern to it.

Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*, seen through the readings of Nussbaum and Farrell, provide us with a model for citizenship that we may now summarize. Most importantly, the model citizen of a rhetorical culture will attend to the appearances of this world. She will seek the knowledge that comes from analytical and scientific investigations; she will seek the truth that comes from dialectical contemplation and dialogue; and she will practice, alongside and in front of other model citizens, the *techne* of rhetorical inquiry. This means that she will practice—as both orator and audience—the art of deliberation, argumentation, and *phronesis*; arriving at conclusions and making judgments about shared contingencies. Her rhetorical practice will assist her polis in making necessarily tragic decisions in the least tragic way, i.e. they will be as ethical as possible because they will be as informed, rational, and just as a thoroughly deliberated judgment among civic friends can be. As a rhetor, she will practice the art of aesthetic reconfiguration and dramatic presentation of appearances that have passed. As an audience, she will practice the art of civic friendship that ideally provides her with a comedic attitude that fosters pluralism, tolerance and humility.

However, though she is a model citizen, she will not be all the polis needs to deal with the appearances of dramatic yesterdays, contingent todays, and unpredictable tomorrows, because she will lack the perspective of a higher authority outside her own polis. The polis needs many, many model citizens to function in an orderly manner; but it also needs something else. Though Farrell notes that neither he nor Aristotle is calling for a sublimation of the individual into a collective will, Farrell fails to mention what Niebuhr is quick to point out, which is that neither Plato nor Aristotle could find a higher perspective than that of the Greek polis from which to make their critiques. Thus, slavery in Greece, though lamented by some classical thinkers, could never be destroyed because it depended upon a higher law; one outside the realm of reason that comes from an ultra-rational and transcendent source, which would have been considered illogical by even the noblest of Greek citizens.

It was exactly this type of higher law that Socrates tried to use to critique the political power of Greek's aristocracy. However, Plato's formulation of the higher law was found in the divine *logos*, the pure forms discovered by dialectically cleansed reason. By Niebuhr's estimation, Plato's formulation of reason was an unrealistic ideal because it didn't account for the "ideological taint" in every reasoned proposition. This is why the Christian aspect of prophetic religion is a necessary one for Niebuhr's ethics of rhetoric. Its unification of the mind and body in spirit are imperative, if man is to avoid pessimism, asceticism, cynicism and despair and its insistence on a higher law than the *logos* has substantial ethical implications. That this is the case can be seen in Niebuhr's critique of Greek thought.

In the history of metaphysical, philosophical thought there are two propositions, two commonly held viewpoints about the nature of man, which in varying compounds and transformations, inform all modern views of man in the West. The first is the view of classical antiquity, i.e. the Graeco-Roman world, and the second is the Biblical view. Though these views are distinct and partly contradictory, “it is important to remember,” Niebuhr writes, “they were actually merged in the thought of medieval Catholicism”—perfectly expressed in the Thomistic synthesis of Augustinian and Aristotelian thought (Hall 2009, 5). The history of modern culture begins, according to Niebuhr, with the destruction of this synthesis, foreshadowed in nominalism, and completed in the Renaissance and Reformation; the former removed the Augustinian elements and the latter removed the Aristotelian perspective. In other words, two unique perspectives about man’s nature existed separately, were momentarily synthesized, and modernity can be demarcated as the period in which they separated once again (though today, Liberal Protestantism represents the effort—abortive, according to Niebuhr—to reconcile the two again). As Niebuhr sees it, the classical view of man is an amalgam of Platonic, Aristotelian, and some Stoic conceptions of human nature. Though they differ on many accounts, they all share one premise in common, which is that man can best be understood as a unique creature because of his rational faculty, his *nous*. Though translated as “spirit,” *nous* is equivalent to man’s capacity for thought and reason. Man’s being is equivalent to his reason and thus, implicitly in Aristotle and explicitly in Plato, his mind and his body are split into two separate entities. Accordingly, though Aristotle and Plato have different ideas about the relationship between the *nous* and the soul, among other things, both share a common “rationalism” and “dualism” that Niebuhr argues have important ethical consequences.

Niebuhr traces these propositions out into their logical consequences. Since reason, *logos*, is the creative and forming principle of the world, it is the divine element in man, identical with God. Therefore, rationalism according to Niebuhr identifies rational man (who is essential man) with the divine (ibid., 7). In Aristotle's view, it is the active *nous* that is not involved with the soul and is immortal; while for Plato, the immutability of ideas is considered proof of the immortality of the *nous*, the *logistikon*. The consequence of the classical body-mind dualism is that the body is considered evil while the rational mind is considered essentially good. This, by the way, is the sharpest contrast between the Hellenic and the Biblical views: "the Bible knows nothing of a good mind and an evil body" (ibid.). Niebuhr argues that Platonic and Aristotelian valuations of *logos* were blind to the realities of man's will-to-power, which is essentially man's will-to-rationalize his own interests using logical arguments. Niebuhr called this the "ideological taint" in all human reasoning, an idea taken from Marx, but which Niebuhr clung to long after he abandoned Marxism as a worldview (*MM*). He sums it up this way:

Men will not cease to be dishonest, merely because their dishonesties have been revealed or because they have discovered their own deceptions. Wherever men hold unequal power in society, they will strive to maintain it. They will use whatever means are most convenient to that end and will seek to justify them by the most plausible arguments they are able to devise. (ibid. 34)

Rhetoric scholars will locate Niebuhr's thoughts on this matter in the tradition of Burkean ideological criticism. What Niebuhr calls the "ideological taint," Burke, drawing from the writings of Bentham, calls "eulogistic coverings" or "fig leaves of the mind" (1989, 304). Ideology, for Mannheim, was a way to transcend political faction, but it wasn't the only way, according to Burke; the second was by way of "myth." This, according to J.A. Stewart (1905), was the method used by Plato, who always fused into his dialogues a mythic element that

“sustained the crisis on another plane”—the plane of “revelation” that takes one from the “order of reason to the order of imagination” (Burke and Gusfield 1989, 307). Burke’s summary of the movement is almost interchangeable with Niebuhr’s: “Political or social motives cannot be ultimate, since they must in turn be grounded in motives outside or beyond the political or social.” Burke and Niebuhr agree that these myths can themselves be used as ideologies and thus, they must be “unmasked” whenever they are used as such. We will see, momentarily, how Niebuhr sought to unmask them using the prophetic voice of his religious tradition, but for now we will only briefly note Niebuhr’s remarks comparing Greek thought to “prophetic religion”: the prophetic insight that it is wrong to identify the nation with God stands in sharpest contrast to the “simple identification of morals and politics in thought of Plato and Aristotle” who were unable to find any perspective “from which to judge the relative character and contingent achievements of their Greek city-state” (*NDMI*, 214). Niebuhr’s summation is that “In this realm of thought Greek philosophy must be regarded as no more than a rationalized form of tribal religion.” In other words, the “noble lie” (*gennaios pseudos*), or what Jonathan Lear prefers to call, “the high-minded fiction,” may be noble and high-minded, but it will never be loving or just to anyone but Greece.

Classical ideas lead to further consequences, which may call “attitudinal.” Though the classical view of human nature is optimistic about man’s future potential—since it finds no essential defect in man’s *nous*—and while it is confident in the virtue of rational man, it lacks the confidence that moderns share in the ability of all men to be either virtuous or happy (*ibid.*, 9). The result is that “an air of melancholy” hangs over Greek life—“There is nothing, methinks, more piteous than man, of all things that creep and breathe upon the

earth,” declares Zeus—“and that note” runs consistently through Greek thought, from Homer to Hellas (ibid.). Neither Plato’s assurance of immortality or Epicurus’ brave encounter with death could dissuade the Greeks from this melancholy mood. So it was, that Aristotle confessed, “not to be born is the best thing and death is better than life,” and argued that melancholy was the concomitant of genius (ibid.).

Consequently, yet another impact of classical perspectives traces itself out: It wasn’t that the wise man couldn’t be virtuous; it was that only the few could be wise. An “aristocratic condescension” can be found in all of classical writings, from the Stoics to Aristotle to Seneca—who prays “forgive the world: they are all fools” (ibid., 10). This led eventually to a conception that history was a meaningless cycle of life and death, of endless recurrences. Classical pessimism about man and history, according to Niebuhr, is the logical consequence of the mind-body dualism characteristic of Greek thought. It culminates logically in neo-Platonism’s conviction that “the body is a tomb.” The consequences of classical dualism are also found in Greek art. Though the Greek poets, contrary to Greek philosophers, viewed man’s human passions as something more than mere impulses of the body, presenting hero after hero disregarding the prudent advices of moderation and rationalism, inevitably dying for this very reason. Greek tragedy offers no resolutions for man’s existential problems in a world where immortality isn’t promised for heroic sacrifice.⁴⁶ Thus, “life is at war with itself, according to Greek tragedy.” No solution can or will ever come, because the conflict is perennial and the only way out of it is death or ascetic prudence.

⁴⁶ See (Arendt 1998).

Having traced out the commonly held hypotheses about man's nature from classical antiquity, it seems that we are left with a view of man's rational faculties and capacity for virtue that don't add up to the facts of life, and a dualism that eventually results in a rejection of the body and the world. This means that though we may begin with Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and move through Burke's dramatic categories of acceptance and rejection, we may not end at these two points. We must account for the mythical element in Niebuhr's thought as well—his unique contribution to the ethics of rhetoric—of which the most notable is the profound symbolism of the Cross that takes us “Beyond Tragedy.” We will see how Niebuhr identifies the “ideal myth” of Kenneth Burke—myth as the “nonpolitical ground of the political, not as antithetical to it, but as the ‘prepolitical’ source out of which it is to be derived” (1989, 310). Our purpose is to observe how Niebuhr goes beyond both Platonic notions of political dissent and Aristotle's theory of the model citizen and roots his rhetorical ethics in a Hebraic-Christian tradition that, if given a voice in a free and open society, results in a more ethical rhetorical culture; one that pays attention to the appearances of politics, unmasking its ideologies and ideological myths, and then goes even further, “beyond tragedy.” This is not to say that Niebuhr can go too far beyond the Aristotelian tradition in his rhetorical theory; Niebuhr doesn't regard the Greek “half” of Western culture as impotent by any means. Niebuhr's insights into the prophetic aspects of Hebrew culture are not isolated in abstraction; Niebuhr lives in the West and is bound to the West's norms of rhetorical culture. The result then, is Niebuhr's theory and practice of a rhetorical voice of dissent that, though it speaks from an authority outside Western civilization, speaks from inside the West's rhetorical culture. In other words, it is a voice *in* the world but *not of* it.

The Prophet's Position: Detached Attachment

Perhaps human selfhood in its collective form constitutionally is unable to imagine any higher value than the common value of its devotion. Hence, the redemptive value of dissident individuals, the prophet, the critic, even the rebel, in a free community.

All theology really begins with Amos.

—Reinhold Niebuhr

Amos was a farmer, not a prophet. God called him to serve as a prophet, but he insisted, even after the calling, that he was a farmer. Amos condemned the nation of Israel on behalf of God: "Are you not as the Ethiopians to me?" Amos was layman, sent to the palace gates by God, to condemn his nation's pride and idolatry. It is a significant and yet small book in the Old Testament, and it is remarkable that Niebuhr would say, "All theology really begins with Amos." Why this was the case, we will soon discover in Niebuhr's articulation of the prophet's task.

Niebuhr's call for a Christian rhetorical voice, characterized by its critical stance toward political sources of injustice and its hopeful message that tomorrow may yield more justice than today, begins in his first book. It may be helpful to recall for a moment Niebuhr's rhetorical situation and the intellectual climate that he emerged in. It is 1927. Niebuhr has just spent twelve years in Detroit, MI as a pastor, where he witnessed Henry Ford running roughshod over autoworkers, the destruction of personality and the alienation of individuals within in his congregation, and the apathy, the lack of empathy and assistance from those uninvolved in the labor struggle, who refused to *look* at the appearances of injustice. Lippmann has just demystified the idea of a public and called for the assistance of experts in government policy. Dewey, in response to Lippmann's

argument, has just argued that we treat American democracy as an experimental method of arranging conflicting interests and that the public, though it exists, has been eclipsed. The last thing anyone wanted to hear, one would have thought, was that we should look to religion for some solutions; especially since Christianity had been so supportive of the *laissez faire* capitalist structure that many viewed responsible for society's ills. Niebuhr however, wasn't ready to scrap religion into the heap. As a *neo-orthodox* thinker (though not a theologian, despite the accusation by many) he was forever interested, no matter the topic of study, in retaining what was good and separating out the bad from traditions. The idea was simply that, whatever it was today, it obviously had some value yesterday or man would not have used it. In *Does Civilization Need Religion?* Niebuhr (1928) began this winnowing task in the field of religion.

Niebuhr argued that religion was dying in modern culture for two reasons. First, it was guilty of literalism. It had been unable to "restate its affirmations" so that they would be consistent with scientific fact (ibid., 220). Secondly, it had been unable to make its ethical and social resources available for the solutions modern civilization's unique moral problems, e.g. labor justice, alienation, urban sprawl, etc. "Its rejuvenation therefore waits" Niebuhr writes, "upon a reorientation of its ethical traditions as well as of its theological conceptions." Niebuhr isn't arguing in the abstract historical sense about cultural movement; he is always concerned with active agents acting in freedom to solve for the problems they encounter. So Niebuhr's "rejuvenation" waits upon individuals who will *do* the reorienting. These individuals must develop the critical faculty while maintaining the reverence and naiveté of the religious faith. Their task is to perform the unnatural unification of "reason and imagination, intelligence and moral dynamics," into mutual

cooperation. Moral purpose must be astutely guided, yet moral purpose itself is rooted in ultra-rational sanctions that an intelligent mind will naturally dismiss. There is nothing rational about love and humility, Niebuhr notes, and a discriminating and critical intelligence will have problems maintaining the fanatical energy needed to foster a “robust moral idealism.” The task, Niebuhr concludes, is difficult but not impossible (ibid., 223).

No civilization can afford to dispense with the irrational moral will or the critical intelligence by which it is made effective in complex situations, Niebuhr insists. He summarizes the situation:

Men need to subject all partial moral achievements to comparison with the absolute standards of truth, beauty and goodness of their religious faith, and yet be able to see and willing to concede the relativities in the absolute values of their devotion. They can be saved from a morality of mere utilitarianism only by the religious quest for an absolute moral standard; yet they need to be discerning enough to see that every ethical achievement, even when inspired by religious motives, is tinged with prudential self-interest. They must continue to strive after freedom and yet realize that human life and character is largely determined by environment. If they seek happiness, divorced from fortune, they nevertheless escape the duty of making the material world serve human welfare. Their ability to discover the transcendent values in human personality has value only if they maintain faith in human nature after they have discovered its imperfections. They must search after the perfect goodness in God and yet be prepared to face the cruelties of life without denying their reality or being driven to despair by them. (ibid., 224-5).

To do this, Niebuhr concludes that a certain type of asceticism is needed; not the type of monkish retreat from the world that is typical of asceticism, but a certain kind of elevated detachment that is engaged in the affairs of men. One such asceticism, for example, would be a detachment from the greed and consumerism of modern culture. Religious idealism, if it is to be as purely objective as possible, must detach itself from the culture it seeks to morally guide. “No religious idealism” writes Niebuhr, “can maintain any degree of purity if it does not enter into a conscious conflict with the civilization in which it functions and succeed in setting some bounds to the expansive desires of men and of nations” (ibid., 226).

This seems to be one of the lessons Niebuhr learned in Detroit when he saw the effects consumerism had on the moral sight of his congregation; one he took with him to Union, where he feared that the academy would temper his polemical public voice by insisting on a bourgeois spirit of patience and progress.

This is why Niebuhr knew the church, as a body, wouldn't make the level of detachment that it needed to. This level of detachment, he insisted, "must be, as it has always been, a minority movement. But the minority ought not detach itself from the majority so completely that it will sacrifice the possibility of acting as a leaven in it" (ibid., 226-7). Niebuhr's use of the word leaven is a Biblical trope rooted in the prophetic tradition. Also called a "saving remnant," the leavening portion comes from a bread metaphor. The idea, still preached today, is that a small portion of yeast can have a dramatic transformative effect on dough. Thus, we've come full circle to "this little light of mine." Niebuhr's task, at this point, is to articulate the necessary tasks and the character traits of what a leavening portion might look like in modern society. The great majority will continue to obscure the defects in human nature and go on reassuring perplexed souls by recounting the victories of the past without seeking new triumphs (ibid.). They will build systems of faith upon the past without any effort to validate them or amend them in fresh experience. This means that rejuvenation and progress must come from the few, the saving remnant who fully understand the implications of the faith they share with the multitudes "whose eyes are holden and who lack the courage to follow even such visions as may come to them" (ibid.). In other words, the majority is missing out on some phenomena, some *appearances*, and even when they encounter them, when they "Hark! Look! Listen!" they lack the courage to address these appearances *ethically*.

A highly spiritual religion can't be possessed only by a few, of course—Niebuhr isn't trying to set up a Plutocracy ruled by Theologian Kings. Niebuhr insists that the new moral idealism of measured detachment must be something the masses can aspire to; the movement cannot afford to lose confidence in the masses, he argues (ibid., 227). The leavening portion must resist the temptation toward mediocrity while also avoiding becoming a priestly caste, an exclusionary cult to which the laymen cannot be initiated. In fact, Niebuhr argues, if it is going to be successful, the modern movement of detachment must be a layman's movement; "for it must express itself in rebuilding the *social order* rather than in rebuilding *new social institutions*" (ibid., 228, *emphasis mine*). The most effective teachers of this movement will "lack neither the technical skill nor the spiritual resource to deal with the practical problems of industry and politics" (ibid.). Religious teachers, Niebuhr notes, may play the role of inspiration for this movement; but the movement will prove ineffective if those engaged in the world's work are not at the mast. The saving remnant consists of men who "use and direct the machines of modern industry without making mechanical efficient an end in itself and without succumbing to the lure of the material rewards which come so easily to those who are proficient in the industrial enterprise" (ibid.).

"Puritanism," Niebuhr notes, "sanctified economic power, and monasticism fled its responsibilities" (ibid., 228-9). The other prophets that told the king what he wanted to hear fit the Puritan model, they were what Niebuhr calls the false-prophets of the king's court. The monkish asceticism denies the world of politics has relevance. Niebuhr's detached leaven will practice a "new asceticism" which will "produce spiritualized technicians who will continue to conquer and exploit nature in the interest of human

welfare, but who will regard their task as a social service and scorn to take a larger share of the returns of industry than is justified by reasonable and carefully scrutinized needs” (ibid.). This means that it must “be in the world and yet not of this world,” be “truly scientific in gauging the advantage to human personality in the conquest of nature and truly religious in finding a basis for human happiness beyond the material rewards which this conquest returns.” It must be emphasized that Niebuhr isn’t condemning the material advantages of commercialism for their own sake, just as Daniel doesn’t turn down the king’s gifts simply because he rejects materialism.

The demand for this rejection comes from the tendency humans have to cloud their judgments when they are intimate with those they must judge. Niebuhr discovers three problems for prophetic ministry that come from this intimacy. The first pertains to the relationship between a prophet’s livelihood and his criticism. If one is dependent on another for financial stability, one will be unable to clearly and objectively see the appearances of this world for what they are. The gifts blur our vision, so to speak. Niebuhr writes, “Too few realize that it is not possible to detach oneself from an unethical nationalism if one continues to enjoy the material advantages which from the nation’s unqualified insistence upon the right to hold its advantages against the world” (ibid., 230). Niebuhr wasn’t just speaking theoretically; he experienced the effects of these gifts on a personal and professional level. As a pastor, he records in one of the more humorous and perhaps personally bitter confessions in *Leaves*; a reflection on a local church’s search for a new pastor. He writes:

After trying futilely to find the right man, who was to have as much scholarship as his predecessor and more “punch,” they decided to raise the salary to \$15,000. I don’t know whether that was the factor which finally solved their problem, but at any rate they have the man they wanted. I suppose it is not easy to get a

combination of Aristotle and Demosthenes, and on the current market, that ought to be worth \$15,000. (*Leaves*, 55)

We ought to question, Niebuhr argues, the oversized salaries and the increasing demand for rhetorical eloquence by church congregations. Niebuhr argues, "What kind of fundamental ethical question can a man be eloquent about when he draws that much cash, particularly since a Croesus or two usually has to supply an undue portion of it?" Then, with a final closing remark, Niebuhr pokes: "I hope that the new prophet won't begin his pastorate with a sermon on the text, 'I count all things but loss.'" One can sense Niebuhr's acute awareness of problems that might interfere with the prophetic task and cloud the prophet's judgment. It was this same awareness that almost led him to refuse the position at Columbia University's Union Theological Seminary.

But Niebuhr's journal reveals another impediment to prophetic ministry. Not only could a prophet's salary cloud his judgment but so too could his relationship with his audience have a tempering affect. Niebuhr writes: "I am not surprised that most prophets are itinerants. Critics of the church think we preachers are afraid to tell the truth because we are economically dependent upon the people of our church. There is something in that, but it does not quite get to the root of the matter" (*ibid.*, 47). Niebuhr notes that he could get a raise anytime he wanted one but that he catches himself weighing his words and gauging their possible effect on certain individuals in his congregation, leading him to conclude: "I think the real clue to the tameness of a preacher is the difficulty one finds in telling unpleasant truths to people whom one has learned to love." This problem begins with the fact that the prophet does speak from within a culture, and that he cares about this culture dearly. Abraham Heschel argues that the most notable trait of the prophet is his ability to experience the suffering of his people as God experiences it (2001). The prophet's

“sensitivity to evil” is highly attuned; even minor injustices assume cosmological proportions because the prophet “is a man who feels fiercely.” The intense capacity for pathos leaves the prophet in a rhetorical tension between rage and lamentation. “God is raging in the prophet’s words,” writes Heschel, yet the prophet is motivated and embodies God’s love. This leads to contradictions in the prophetic message that seem perplexing. “What hidden bond exists between the word of wrath and the word of compassion, between ‘consuming fire’ and ‘everlasting love’?” Heschel asks. The only solution to this tension is that it transcends the demand for rational coherency because it is about the relationship between man and God. Nevertheless, the prophet, as Niebuhr reveals here, always feels the tension between criticism and love:

To speak the truth in love is a difficult, and sometimes an almost impossible, achievement. If you speak the truth unqualifiedly, that is usually because your ire has been aroused or because you have no personal attachment to the object of your strictures. Once personal contact is established you are very prone to temper your wind to the shorn sheep. It is certainly difficult to be human and honest at the same time. I’m not surprised that most budding prophets are tamed in time to become harmless parish priests. (*Leaves*, 47)

In 1924, when he wrote this reflection, Niebuhr wasn’t sure what business he had “carping at the good people who are doing the world’s work and who are enmeshed to a greater or less degree in the iniquities of society” (ibid.) What Niebuhr doesn’t call our attention to is the fact that the love of the people is required before one can criticize them prophetically. By 1927 he’d had enough; his frustrations with Detroit peaked and he realized that the problem was with his definition of his parishioners as “good people.” He began to view the pathetic element as *priestly* and saw it as a challenge to justice and morally potent faith. He writes:

The perennial conflict between priest and prophet is given in the double function of religion. The priest dispenses comfort and the prophet makes the challenge of

religion potent. The priest is more numerous than the prophet because human selfishness is as determining in religion as in other fields. Though the priest always defeats the prophet in the end, the prophet is avenged because his original experience is the reality which makes the priest's assurance plausible. There is no way of guaranteeing the reality of God if someone does not make them real in experience, and there is no way of declaring the victory of the ideal if someone does not defeat reality in the name of the ideal in history. Religion validates itself in spiritual experience and moral triumph... It is not possible to free religion altogether of its priestly corruptions. But anything which will make it more difficult to accept the comforts of faith without accepting its challenges will increase the moral potency of religion and decrease the possibility of its corruption by those who want to use it for the purpose of ensuring the dignity of human life without paying the price of moral effort for the boon. (1927, 216-217)

To muster the courage to challenge the world, he targeted the "nation" instead of individuals, and he reflected on the model of Jesus's prophetic ministry, instead of his priestly one: "Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees!" Niebuhr noted, were words written by the embodiment of perfect love (*Leaves*, 75). Yet even here, the prophet risked becoming too intimate, not with his parishioners, but with the nation. Niebuhr writes, "Whenever religion comes into a too-intimate relation with the processes of government, it succumbs to the temptation of regarding government as only an instrument of God and of forgetting its prophetic function of declaring that the state is a rebel against God" (*L&J*, 75). For this reason, amateur, rather than professional and established religious readers, usually perform the prophetic function.

The third and final problem Niebuhr discovers impeding the prophet's calling comes from one of his last reflections in *Leaves*, written in 1928. He begins with a confession: "I think I ought to repent of the many unkind things I have said about various ministers. We liberal preachers are too ready to attribute conventional opinions to cowardice." (141). Niebuhr found himself, unknowingly and unwittingly, taking the position of Greek rationalism he later condemned in his arguments against John Dewey. Niebuhr had assumed those

ministers, having read the same bible and having seen the same injustices he had, must have been refusing to speak out cowardice; he assumed they were afraid of losing their jobs or were afraid of hurting their parishioners feelings. Now, Niebuhr returned to his Jamesian roots and located the problem in habits of thought:

I think we have a right to wonder a little how one can claim discipleship to one who disturbed history so much and yet be such a thorough conformist. Yet it is usually not cowardice but mental inertia which creates the conformity; and sometimes the conformity is the honest fruit of a finely poised rather than a daring mind. After all most of us are conformists in some sense, and it is rather presumptuous on our part to condemn every type of conformity except our own. (ibid.)

From this reflection, Niebuhr has another, more telling one. Noting that the editor of the Christian Register has called every liberal churchgoer who refused to join the Unitarian church a coward, he writes that it is then his “ox that is gored.” If the Register editor can go wrong in assuming his own motives then, Niebuhr decides, he may well be wrong in assuming why parsons fail to measure up to his standards. The final note in this journal entry is telling because it summarizes how Niebuhr, later in his life, articulates the embodiment of love in the realm of justice, an idea we will return to in the final section of our analysis. He writes: “I learn how to be tolerant when I become the victim of somebody else’s spiritual pride.” This is the key to understanding Niebuhr’s method of criticism for it was a solution to a perennial problem, which Niebuhr records here: “Whenever a prophet is born, either inside the church or outside the church, he does face the problem of preaching repentance without bitterness and of criticizing without spiritual pride” (*Leaves*, 74). How was he to condemn the world and still love it? How was he to condemn the world and *not* love himself?

Instead of going after Ford, or the Christian Register editor, or the pastor on the other side of town, Niebuhr formulated a way to condemn the nation, the church, and the

individuals, who weren't furthering the cause of justice. Instead of condemning them personally, he condemned their pride, and by doing so he condemned in them what was in every one of us; in other words, his prophetic criticism, at its most raging and tragic, and at its most humble and comic, was always given from the ironic perspective of transcendent judgment. What was it that Niebuhr had and others did not? How was he able to approach the world through the ironic frame, as a spectator and observer, instead of as a participant? I believe that there are two things unique about Niebuhr that led him to the ironic perspective of the prophet. The first, is his broad array of life experiences from many and diverse cultures, classes, and nationality. In Niebuhr's journal entries, he reflects on his visits to the automobile plants in Detroit, describing in intimate detail, feeling that the workers were ghosts of their former selves, noting the immense heat that pummeled out of the foundry onto the laborers, for hours on end. Niebuhr recalls visiting the Rhine in 1918, touring the war training camps, writing with anxiety about life's ultimate incongruities: "I hardly know how to bring order out of confusions in my mind in regard to this war" (ibid., 19). As a pastor, he counseled parishioners on their deathbeds, praying with them as they lamented their failures and unfulfilled promises. Though Niebuhr experienced all these things, his response could just as well been an overwhelming despair, a cynicism that knew no bounds, nihilism, a complete asectism and rejection of the world.

Take the last experience, for instance, and we may note how powerful are its affects and effect on many thinkers, thinkers like Heidegger and Freud, who encountered death without a faith in life's meaningfulness, and whose entire lives were shaped by the experience. The first, rejecting the meaning system of his childhood, tried to, as Arendt describes his ascetic withdrawal, hide, like a fox, in a fallen tree in the lonely woods. Freud

however, refused to retreat from the world, for he was, after all, a lover of the world, and so he created his own sense of meaning, one that has proven helpful to the many people; as Niebuhr would describe it, having abandoned religious *beliefs* as irrational and illogical, they nevertheless require *faith* in an ultimate principle of interpretation. The question then, for an evaluation of psychoanalysis, would be, does it contain an ironic worldview, or a tragic one? The answer to that question would likely depend on how one interprets the Oedipus myth.

This is the power of myth; the second thing in Niebuhr's life that led him to an ironic worldview, for his myth was inundated with irony. The ironic perspective of detached-attachment is the perspective consistent with the Hebraic-Christian attitudes as a prophetic religion. Niebuhr's attachment to the world, leads him to explore its many different experiences and pay attention to appearances. The Christian myth teaches him to be on the look out, when attending to the various appearances of this world, for dramatic irony. This ironic perspective doesn't keep him from engaging the world tragically or comically. Niebuhr is able to call a spade a spade, and where there is injustice and pathos, he calls attention to it, never cowering, but condemning the causes of injustice with unqualified judgments. The ironic perspective doesn't keep him from engaging the world comically either; Niebuhr states "laughter is a sane and healthful response to the innocent foibles of men; and even to some which are not innocent;" and also, "A sense of humour is indispensable to men of affair who have the duty of organizing their fellowmen in common endeavors. It reduces the friction of life and makes the foibles of men tolerable" (*ERN*, 51). Niebuhr argues that there is, in this laughter, "a nice mixture of mercy and judgment, of censure and forbearance." Yet, as Niebuhr notes, comedy, faced with serious evil, senses its

impotence, and turns into bitterness. Serious evil, he writes, must be dealt with seriously. That fact that life's ultimate incongruities can't be laughed away, this fact doesn't keep us from trying. Thus, we have "gallows humor." But Niebuhr insists that when we try to turn all of life into a comedy, we reduce it to meaninglessness (ibid., 57). Faith is the final triumph over life's ultimate incongruities. There is laughter in the vestibule of the temple, he notes, the echoes of laughter in the temple itself; but there is only faith and prayer in the holy of holies.

One may think of the philosophy of the absurd here, which Camus articulated so poetically, and in which, recognizing the threat of meaninglessness in it, he embedded the implicit idea of heroism for heroism's sake. Faith is the final triumph over incongruity, Niebuhr insisted, and Camus' heroic Dr. Roux demonstrates such faith, just as Sisyphus does; for though it may not take a theistic belief in an anthropomorphic God, it nevertheless requires a religious faith that something different will happen, one day, perhaps, if I just keep pushing the rock up the hill, if I just keep marching in Selma and getting arrested, if I just keep riding, marching, praying, wondering, and fighting for freedom, justice, or equality. This is why there was a group called "Atheists for Niebuhr" and this is why, though Camus was an avowed atheist, a recent *Christianity Today* cover article featured a young man who became a Christian after reading Camus.

Returning full-circle, to the position of the prophet as ironist, we find another imperative for the prophet to remain in the world of appearances, yet to partially transcend it as well. The ironic contrasts and incongruities in a historical drama are obvious, but they are often missed, "because irony cannot be directly experienced," Niebuhr argues (*IAM*, 153). The knowledge of irony depends, according to Niebuhr, "upon

an observer who is not so hostile to the victim of irony as to deny the element of virtue which must constitute a part of the ironic situation; nor yet so sympathetic as to discount the weakness, the vanity and pretension which constitute another element." Participants in an ironic situation cannot, unless they be exceptionally self-critical, fulfill the latter condition and thus, "the knowledge of irony is usually reserved for observers rather than participants." For this reason then, the prophet must remain observant, but not participate in the conflicts of power politics; ironic refutations of power are demanded of him and only the rare statesman, perhaps Abraham Lincoln for example, would be capable of doing both.

Prophetic Criticism: Polemicizing Pride in Public Argument

The ideological taint, the dishonest pretension of universality, which accompanies every partial perspective in history does not mean that significant choices between rival political movements cannot be made; we are still capable of making them, though we are ourselves involved in rationalization and have no absolute and impartial perspective. If there were not some degree of freedom from interest in the human mind, there could be no culture at all, and all life would be no more than a conflict of interests. But our choices will be less confused if we know how to discount the latest ideology, which always present itself in the guise of a final freedom from rationalization.

—Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics*

The gospel cannot be preached with truth and power if it does not challenge the pretension and pride, not only of individuals, but of nations, cultures, civilizations, economic and political systems... if the ministers... become again the simple priests and chaplains of this American idolatry, subtly compounded with a few stray Christian emphases... the church becomes not merely useless but dangerous.

—Niebuhr, "The Idolatry of America"

The prophet's business, Niebuhr writes, is to "remind the men of power" that "God resisteth the proud and giveth grace to the humble" and that he will "cast the mighty from their seats and exalt them of low degree," that "he bringeth princes to naught and maketh

the judges of the earth as vanity" (*L&J*, 75). Prophetic religion, he argues, "sees how all human power is tempted to pride and injustice" and specifically, it marks out for criticism the priest-kings and god-kings of sacrosanct and majestic power. The method by which one destroys the ideological pretenses of others, the formal method of ideological criticism as Niebuhr articulates and practices it, can be fairly called "polemicizing pride." When Niebuhr finds an injustice he locates as many potential causes of the injustice as possible. Locating these causes, he is sure to note that none of them are the sole cause but that all work together to bring about the manifestation of injustice. From the causes he draws out agents responsible for them. He qualifies his comments continually, noting that there are many agents involved in every crisis of injustice, etc. Though always a careful qualifier of his remarks, Niebuhr was nevertheless quite capable of speaking with a prophet's rage. When he located a public, nation, statesman and/or public intellectuals that were the root cause of injustice, he attacked their rhetoric in order to reveal their motives. Burke argues that if you want to know *why* people do things, pay attention to what they say, and Niebuhr could easily have given this advice as well. Niebuhr paid attention to what people said and in their words he listened for pride, egotism, and self-interests. This was his method of prophetic criticism. Niebuhr called attention to both prideful and sensual tones in public discourses wherever the taint of self-interests manifested.

The prophet's task, I argue, is to criticize the manifestations of pride in public rhetorics of significance. When we talk about pride we are talking about the manifestation of sin. The occasion for sin is man's twofold nature as both a finite and a free being, both a creature and a creator, which results in existential anxiety. Anxiety, Niebuhr argues, "is the internal description of the state of temptation" (*NDMI*, 182). The prophet starts with the

assumption that, though this tension is perennial and permanently an occasion for sin, it is not normative. Anxiety is not sin. Man can choose to not overstep his creaturely bounds in the search for security in the natural world, though he often doesn't. Man is insecure, Niebuhr notes, and involved in natural contingency which he seeks to overcome by a "will-to-power that overreaches the limits of human creatureliness" (ibid., 178). "Man is ignorant and involved in the limitations of a finite mind," Niebuhr argues; "but he pretends that he is not limited." The result is that everything he achieves, culturally and intellectually, becomes "infected with the sin of pride" (ibid., 179). This infection disturbs the harmony of the natural world on two planes. It disturbs the religious plane because man rebels against God and attempts to usurp his place on the throne. It disturbs the moral and social plane because it results in injustice. It is the priestly task, we can assume, to deal with the first plane by addressing his parishioners from within the sacred walls of the church. It is the prophet's task to respond to the social and moral plane, both inside and outside the church walls, because the prophet's number one concern, as it was for Amos and Niebuhr the ethicist, and as Heschel has called our attention to, is justice. The prophet longs for justice to roll down like waters.

Niebuhr argues that there are three forms of pride: the pride of power, the pride of knowledge and the pride of virtue. The last form gives way to another, fourth form, Niebuhr calls "spiritual pride." We must note that Niebuhr never states that these three prides neither represent the limits of prophetic criticism; nor does he ever state that he uses these three criticisms rhetorically in a model of prophetic criticism. But the evidence is there in his writings and in those he drew inspiration from, such as Amos, that these do represent

the model for prophetic criticism and its limits. There are few sins one can commit that can't be accounted for under this rubric.

Though one will find much of Nietzsche's influence throughout Niebuhr's work, it is always displayed most clearly when Niebuhr discusses power. Yet, in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr is giving the Gifford lectures and thus, we are given a Bertrand Russell quote that is more appropriate for his audience. Quoting from Russell's *Power, A New Social Analysis*, Niebuhr writes, "Of the infinite desires of man, the chief are the desires for power and glory. They are not identical though closely allied." Pride of power occurs when man doesn't recognize the contingency of his existence, makes himself the judge and jury of his actions, or believes he is the author of his existence. Though everyone is tempted to such pride, it happens to be the case that those who have more than an ordinary degree of social power are most guilty of the sin (ibid., 189). In a footnote, Niebuhr continues with Russell's refrain: "Every man would like to be God, if it were possible; some few find it difficult to admit the possibility." Those those who have power commit the sin of pride of power but they are not alone. At the other end of the spectrum, those who have none at all lust for it, committing the sin of lust for power that has pride as its end-in-view. In his insecurity man seeks security and knows that power is the only thing that allows his to control as many variable as possible. In the first case, the self is completely oblivious to the finitude of its existence and tromps about the world in complete confidence and pride. In the second case, the self is completely conscious of its finitude and therefore desires and uses all of its energy to control it by gaining power over it.

The pride of power by those who feel secure in this world is condemned in Biblical prophecy, Niebuhr notes, where it is declared to be "bogus" and always goes "before a fall."

This pride is always destroyed by history, the prophet warns, and the warning is true, for every great empire that has ever existed is a historical relic. The fact that Americans have an undeniable faith and confidence that what happened to the Greeks and Romans will never happen to the US, Niebuhr marked as a pride of power that spells eventual destruction. Nothing has changed, for prophetic criticism, since the time of Ezekiel, who prophesied doom upon the all the nations of the earth and who constantly accused them of having a false sense of “security, independence and self-mastery.” For instance, Ezekiel accuses Egypt of imagining herself the responsible party for the gift that is the Nile River. Egypt says, “My river is my own, I have made it for myself.” Niebuhr notes Ezekiel’s prophetic response: “In the doom which overtakes this pride the real source and end of life will be revealed: ‘They shall know that I am the Lord’ (Ez. 30:8).” This is the reoccurring trope of the pride of power in those who have a false sense of security.

On the other hand, there is the pride of power by those who seek power to evade insecurity. This is the sin committed often by the “advancing forces of human society in distinction to the established forces” (*NDMI*, 190). The most obvious example of this type of pride is the pride of scientific man. At the turn of the century the scientific advances of modern culture were the result of man’s desire to overcome the limits and insecurities of nature. This is a legitimate enterprise according to Niebuhr; but it gives way to the pride of power when the mastery of nature is corrupted and gives way to the exploitation of nature. In modern debates, this would be the pride of power that one often hears laced into debates about environmental issues. For Niebuhr, we need not look at large crises to find it but only to the individual agrarian farmer, whose “arrogance of independence and greedy effort to overcome the insecurity of nature’s rhythms and seasons by garnering her stores

with excessive zeal and beyond natural requirements” (ibid., 191). Greed then, Niebuhr notes, is another name for this form of the pride of power. This false security is shattered by the prophet’s promise of death, “a vicissitude of nature which greed cannot master.” writes Niebuhr. It is what Christ says to the rich fool who wishes to eat, drink, and be merry: “This night thy soul shall be required of thee” (Luke 12: 19-20). Niebuhr further notes that this sin of greed is the “setting sin of a bourgeois culture” that is constantly tempted to “regard physical comfort and security as life’s final good and to hope for its attainment to a degree which is beyond human possibilities.” Niebuhr sums up with an anecdote: “Modern man has forgotten that nature intends to kill man and will succeed in the end.”

The desire for security in nature is not the only manifestation of this pride of power that is called greed. It also manifest in the social realm of course. Here, the “power over men” combines itself with the “power over matter” and results in a “will-to-power” that always involves the ego in injustice. The will-to-power has an ironic element in it because it always results in the very insecurity it tries to overcome. Thus, the atomic bomb, researches and designed to make the US more safe, makes her less safe than she has ever been. It was no different for the prophet Isaiah’s culture either, who wrote: “Woe to thee that spoilest, and thou wast not spoiled; and dealest treacherously, and they dealt not treacherously with thee! When thou shalt cease to spoil, thou shalt be spoiled” (Is. 33:1). The result of man’s establishing himself in power and glory is always followed by the fear of falling from this power and glory. Niebuhr’s example is nicely put: “Poverty is a peril to the wealthy but not to the poor” (*NDMI*, 193); and his concluding aphorism is poetic: “Thus man seeks to make himself God because he is betrayed by both his greatness and his

weakness; and there is no level of greatness and power in which the lash of fear is not at least one strand in the whip of ambition” (ibid.).

The second form of pride Niebuhr characterizes as a “more spiritual sublimation” of the pride of power, and that is “intellectual pride” (ibid.). Sometimes these two are so intertwined and involved with one another that it is hard to tell the two apart. Niebuhr notes that every ruling oligarchy has needed the ideological support of its creeds to bulwark its authority, just as much as it has a police power. Thus, intellectual pride is a useful concept for rhetorical studies because it gives us a new way to understand ideological discourse. It is not the privilege of the oligarchy but is found in all human knowledge, which is inevitably tainted by the “ideological” taint. Simply said, “It pretends to be more true than it is.” Man, like all animals, is limited intellectually by his time and place; yet he is not *as* limited as the animals are, for man actually knows something of these limits. Since man knows more than his immediate situation he constantly seeks to understand his immediate situation in terms of a total situation (ibid., 182). He is unable to define such a total situation without coloring his knowledge by the limits of his finite perspective and, knowing this, he becomes a skeptic. “The abyss of meaninglessness yawns on the brink of all his mighty spiritual endeavors” Niebuhr concludes, and this abyss tempts him to deny the limited character of his knowledge. It is involved in human ignorance, yet it is, according to Niebuhr, always something more than ignorance—an effort to hide that ignorance by pretension. In other words, just like the pride of power, intellectual pride results from two anxious situations. On the one hand, man’s ignorance of his ignorance, like the powerful man’s ignorance of his finitude; and on the other hand, man’s recognition of

his ignorance and subsequent willful veiling of his conditioned knowledge and the taint of self-interest in his truth.

Intellectual pride then, is the “pride of reason which forgets that it is involved in a temporary process and imagines itself in complete transcendence over history” (ibid., 195). Engels, Niebuhr argues, was wrong to think that the ideological taint’s driving impulse was the unconscious. The real fact of the matter, according to Niebuhr, is that “all pretensions of final knowledge and ultimate truth are partly prompted by the uneasy feeling that the truth is not final and also by an uneasy conscience which realizes that the interests of the ego are compounded with this truth.” It is an interesting side note that Niebuhr calls attention to how this ideological taint manifest in individual rhetorics as well as collective ones. Descartes and Schopenhauer he categorizes as examples of the individual pretense; Hegel and Comte he categorizes in the latter, collective pretense of a nation. This brings us to another aspect of intellectual pride, and that is the significant inability of the agent to recognize the same or similar limitations of perspective in himself that he detects in others. The Marxists and Socialists were the most apt example of this pride of intellect in Niebuhr’s time. They imagined that everyone’s motives were ideologically tainted except their own. Perhaps it was an ignorance of their ignorance, due to the fact that Marx thought ideological taints were limited to economic structures. Niebuhr isn’t so sure though. “The vehemence with which the foe is accused of errors of which the self regards itself free,” Niebuhr writes, “betrays the usual desperation with which the sled seeks to hide the finiteness and determinateness of its own position from itself” (ibid., 197). The explicit nature of this pride, it seems to Niebuhr, is always revealed clearly whenever the universalistic note in a certain truth becomes the basis for dominations over life that don’t

conform to it, i.e. scapegoating and atonements. Niebuhr's example is that of the religious nationalist, who "declares in one moment that his culture is not an export article but is valid for his nation alone" and in the next moment "declares that he will save the world by destroying inferior forms of culture." This leads Niebuhr to another observation: the white race insists that the negro race in America is unable have equal rights because it is unable to profit from them due to its lack of civilized culture and intelligence; yet, the white race knows that if it were to offer equal education then it would soon be discovered that its intellectual pride was unjustified and could no longer justify the unjust privileges it currently maintains.

The third form of pride we've called the "pride of virtue" or moral pride and it is important to note, Niebuhr insist, that all forms of moral pride are involved in intellectual pride. The reason for this is that, excluding the most abstract philosophical debates, any attempt to claim one's truth as ultimate truth is primarily meant to establish one's good as *the Good* (ibid., 199). How can we spot moral pride? It is easy enough, actually; it is revealed in every judgment that condemns another for failure to conform to our own "highly arbitrary standards." Niebuhr writes:

Since the self judges the self by its own standards it finds itself good. It judges other by its own standards and finds them evil, when their standards fail to conform to its own. This is the secret of the relationship between cruelty and self-righteousness. When the self mistakes its standards for God's standards it is naturally inclined to attribute the very essence of evil to non-conformists. (ibid.)

In a beautiful Paulean passage, we find the character of this moral pride perfectly described. St. Paul writes, "that they have the zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they, being ignorant of God's righteousness and going about to establish their own righteousness,

have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God” (Romans 10:2-3).⁴⁷ The worst part of this pride, for Niebuhr, was that it made virtue the very vehicle for sin. Niebuhr understood, in 1937, the process involved in this cruel logic; one that Burke formulated for rhetoric scholars as the “guilt-redemption” cycle. Niebuhr writes, specifically about Rational Humanism:

... it forgets the finiteness and creatureliness of man. It does not subject human righteousness to a transcendent righteousness, the righteousness of God. Thus it tempts men to “go about establishing its own righteousness” and finally denigrates into a fanaticism more grievous than that of dogmatic religion. The logic of the decay of modern culture from universalistic humanism to nationalistic anarchy may be expressed as follows: Men seek a universal standard of human good. After painful effort they define it. The painfulness of their effort convinces them that they have discovered a genuinely universal value. To their sorrow, some of their fellow men refuse to accept the standard. Since they know the standard to be universal the recalcitrance of their fellows is a proof, in their minds, of some defect in humanity of the non-conformists. Thus a rationalistic age creates a new fanaticism. The non-conformists are figuratively expelled from the human community. (*BT*, 237)

This is why Paul refuted the claims to salvation of those who insisted that the “righteousness of works” was the path to the Kingdom of God, as he follows up with “lest any man should boast.” The pride of virtue not only involves us in the greatest form of sin, but it also involves us the greatest guilt because, Niebuhr argues, “It is responsible for our most serious cruelties, injustices and defamations against our fellowmen.” He concludes noting that “The whole history of racial, national, religious and other social struggles is a

⁴⁷ Though Niebuhr doesn’t cite this passage in *Moral Man*, it is exactly this fanaticism that Niebuhr was trying to create and yet temper with reason, by way of a social “illusion” that perfect justice could be achieved; something he later regretted writing, but that had significant influence on how King understood his task during the civil rights movement. The question being, how do I condemn the sins that lead to injustice without being self-righteous myself; the answer being, non-violent protests that don’t voice one’s self-righteousness but reveal it in action, i.e. the “words” of non-violent protests can’t be argued with or dismissed as ideological.

commentary on the objective wickedness and social miseries which result from self-righteousness" (*NDMI*, 200).

As Niebuhr was delivering this very lecture he didn't need to reach far for evidence of the claim; the bombs of WWII were shaking the Gifford lectures hall he delivered them in, causing the power to go out, and an eerie doom seemed to linger over every lecture. This must have come roaring to the forefront of his audience's minds when Niebuhr began his final lecture on pride. Niebuhr, moving from the pride of power that leads to intellectual pride, intellectual pride that leads to moral pride, finally arrives at the final form of pride, "spiritual pride." Niebuhr writes, "The ultimate sin is the righteous sin of making the self-deification implied in moral pride explicit" (*ibid.*) In other words, when man's "partial standards and relative attainments are explicitly related to the unconditioned good, and claim divine sanction." This, Niebuhr argues, is precisely the reason that religion isn't as necessarily as it is sometimes supposed, an "inherently virtuous human quest for God." It is instead, Niebuhr argues, "merely a final battleground between God and man's self-esteem" and "in that battle even the most pious practices may be instruments of human pride." This means that much of prophetic criticism must always be against religion, the church, and the self, a realization of the Biblical emphasis on removing the plank from one's own eye before one points out the splinter in another's. The same man that professes to follow Christ and fall under his judgment will, in the next moment, try to prove that his own standards are more similar to Christ's than his enemy's. We should remind ourselves once again that even in this theological exposition delivered as a lecture, Niebuhr is invoking the very principle he speaks on, for his audience is made up entirely of religious thinkers and theological

“geniuses” of Europe’s intellectual class. To that audience then, we can imagine Niebuhr speaking these words, while looking each one of them in the eye:

The worst form of class domination is religious class domination in which, as for instance in the Indian caste system, a dominant priestly class not only subjects subordinate classes to social disabilities but finally excludes them from participation in any universe of meaning. The worst form of intolerance is religious intolerance, in which the particular interests of the contestants hide behind religious absolutes. The worst form of self-assertion is religious self-assertion in which under the guise of contrition before God, He is claimed as the exclusive ally of our contingent self. “What goes by the name of ‘religion’ in the modern world,” declares a modern missionary, “is to a great extent unbridled human self-assertion in religious disguise. (ibid., 200-1)

The conclusion is clear: a man that recognizes that God has revealed himself must never assume that possession of this revelation makes him more righteous or more contrite than other men. Niebuhr loathed spiritual pride so much that one cannot but assume it is the reason he preferred Amos over other prophets; for it was Amos who declared to Israel that its covenant with God didn’t grant it special protection, but instead, demanded of it a greater responsibility. It was Amos who pronounced the word of the Lord, which surely must have sounded horrifying to the Hebrews: “Are you not as the Ethiopians to me!”

With this final analysis of sin as pride, Niebuhr moves into another lecture that is pertinent for us, if we are to understand the prophetic perspective, and that is the notion of “collective egoism.” Niebuhr notes that it is correct to assume that collective pride is the mere accumulation of individuals who share the same pride and that “strictly speaking, only individuals are moral agents” (ibid., 208). Nevertheless, there are some distinct differences between individual and collective pride that Niebuhr finds important to investigate. It is important because in some ways, group pride, though made of individuals, has a weird ability to achieve a “certain authority over the individual and results in unconditioned demands by the group upon the individual.” The group develops “organs of

will” such as the “state” and when it does, it appears to the individual to become the “independent center of moral life.” Once again, we find Niebuhr’s conclusions crossing paths with Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*; both thinkers are noting that *ethos* is a community project and is never the sole possession of an individual. An individual in a collective that has a moral agent acting as its representative will be more inclined to bow to the agent’s “pretensions and to acquiesce” to its claims, “even when these do not coincide with his moral scruples or inclinations” (ibid.). Furthermore, not only will the individual be more likely to acknowledge the pretenses of the authority of the collective, but also a collective’s pretenses typically exceed the claims of an individual. “The group” Niebuhr writes, “is more arrogant, hypocritical, self-centered and more ruthless in the pursuit of its ends than the individual.” (ibid.) The tension between the *I* and the *we* is created regarding moral issues, making for an interesting phenomenon, which Cavour, the Italian politician, states as such: “If we did for ourselves what we do for our country, what rascals we would be” (ibid., 209).

The state is able to make these moral claims upon the individual for several reasons, all of which are important factors to criticize if one is a prophet. First, the egotism of groups is expressed most consistently by the national state and thus, it is the highest source of criticism for the prophet. Second, we must inquire why this is the case, and we find, according to Niebuhr, that the nation state “gives the collective impulses of the nation such instruments of power and presents the imagination with such obvious symbols of its discrete collective identity that” it can make absolute claims for itself, and “enforce those claims by power and to give them plausibility and credibility by the majesty and panoply of its apparatus” (ibid.). Thus, it prompts obedience by the fear of power on the one hand and by reverence for its majesty on the other, revealing, in its majesty, the temptation to

idolatry that Nazi Germany was guilty of to the *nth* degree, and to which the US also fell victim to after its WWII victory.

It is here we find Niebuhr's calling for prophetic ministry embedded in critiques of national pride and idolatry. The sinful pride and idolatrous pretensions of a large political group are inevitable if it is to have any cohesion. Furthermore, this collective possesses only an inchoate "mind," and its organs of self-transcendence are "very unstable and ephemeral compared to its organs of the will." Nevertheless, it does have an organ of self-transcendence and self-criticism. Just as an individual has a *daimon*, an other self that it must be able to live with if it is going to live at all, so to does a nation. The other self of the nation is the "prophetic minority;" it is the instrument of self-transcendence for a nation, just as the state is the organ of a nation's will. The prophetic minority must understand that group egotism, collective pride, is "man's last, and in some respects most pathetic, effort to deny the determinate and contingent character of his existence. The very essence of human sin is in it" (ibid., 213). It is also the most fruitful sin of human guilt and this is why the prophet starts with the collective manifestations of these sins of pride; group egotism, from family to nation, is the "most pregnant source of injustice and conflict than" any purely individual pride." The task of the prophet is to recognize, on the one hand, the positive aspects of group pride, such as the necessity of it for survival; but on the other hand, it must always note that men are not animals and no matter how much a nation says it is "fighting for survival", men are never merely fighting for survival—men fight for ultimate values that they think are absolute; if they didn't, martyrs and heroes would be mocked instead of heralded in all of literature. With this, we arrive at the reason for prophetic criticism.

Niebuhr first explored tragedy as a form of appearance reconfiguration in a 1938 essay "Greek Tragedy and Modern Politics," published later in a collection *Christianity and Power Politics* (1969). He begins the essay by noting that the recurring motif in Greek tragedy is "the hero's deeper involvement in his fate through his very efforts to extricate himself" (95). He illustrates this principle in a paraphrase of Oedipus and then notes that the "modern international situation offers abundant proof of the profound insight into human tragedy of the Greek dramatists. They were not writing melodrama but were interpreting history, including that of modern times" (ibid., 96). The democratic nations of the world, from Niebuhr's perspective, were involving themselves in world catastrophe by their very attempts to avoid such catastrophe. The democratic nations were the so-called "good" nations, according to their own estimations, yet Niebuhr insisted, "History does not justify simple moral judgments" (ibid.). The US and Britain, perhaps better than some, were not the "good" guys and worst, in thinking they were, they pursued a course of action Niebuhr called "gangster" diplomacy, the result of which was that they gave the fascist nations evidence that the US and Britain were correct in their estimation that they represented a threat to their way of life. Thus, in trying to control the fascists they made the fascist stronger and more fanatical. The US and Britain were, by Niebuhr's estimate, "tragically committed to this dance of death" (ibid., 99).

Had the U.S. been destroyed, Niebuhr argued that the story would be tragic because it featured that key element in all tragic drama: death in defense of a principle without hesitation or adjustment to the realities of the situation. Tragedy is the narrative device that tells the story of principles run amuck. The tragic element in history is revealed when men make conscious choices to do evil in the name of a good cause. If men, Niebuhr writes,

“cover themselves with guilt in order to fulfill some high responsibility; or if they sacrifice some high value for the sake of a higher or equal one they make a tragic choice.”⁴⁸ Niebuhr argues that man’s dialectical nature is consists in his existence as a creator and a creature. When man’s creator capacity takes over and he forgets his role as creature, he will soon find himself in a tragic, if not ironic, situation. Niebuhr finds in Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* a prophetic tale of tragedy America would do well to remember.

Thus understood, the prophet’s critical task is to call attention to the appearances of pride in the discourse of those in power, the hubris of those who are in control, the self-righteousness revealed in the uncritical actions of unqualified power. These are the elements in public discourse that reveal a march toward tragic endings. The prophet, sitting in the balcony of the theatre, stands on stage at intermission, and tells the audience what is about to happen—a prophetic spoiler alert! But like all prophets, he knows that the drama is scripted, and that the show will go on; he is going to be able to save the city from destruction. So the prophet earns his ethos in the tragic framing and the prideful criticism. He knows that the future will bear out his judgments and, after the destruction is over, he will have been proven right, for as Niebuhr notes, “Outraged truth has a way of avenging itself” (*DCNR*, 8). The audience will turn to him again, as for generations people have turned back to the writings of Amos, and they will reflect on the sins of the generation that bore them. They will see pride in their forefathers that led to destruction, and they they will look around and see that same pride in themselves and their own nation. If this is all they do, they will refuse to participate. They will say “my vote doesn’t count,” they will concentrate

⁴⁸ Niebuhr, *Irony*, xxiii.

on their family alone, they will ignore appearances and leave justice outside their own circle of friends to chance. But there is another option; there is another way.

The prophet calls a nation to task whenever it claims a more absolute devotion to values that transcend its life than the facts warrant, and whenever it regards the values to which it is loyal as more absolute than they really are (*NDMI*, 213). The inception of prophetic religion, Niebuhr notes, was its initial conflict with national self-deification (*ibid.*, 214). Though Niebuhr doesn't ever mention exactly how one should discover what a nation's claims are, his own prophetic practice and common sense will show that he is calling for a prophetic rhetorical criticism; the claims a nation makes are always made by its statesmen, its public intellectuals, its journalists, its priests and kings. If the state is the organ of a collective *will*, and the prophet is the organ of a collective *conscience* or *self-transcendence*, then civil discourse is a collective's *voice*. This voice then, is the collective self that the prophetic *other self* criticizes through dialectical refutations and rhetorical polemics, just as the self and the other self are in dialogue with one another as conscience manifest itself. The next question that begs we answer it then, is what *attitude* should the collective self have, if it is to engage in the dialogue with its other self, the prophetic voice? What attitude must civil discourse carry with it in order for the dialogue to be fruitful of ethical and just actions? And how is this attitude formed and shaped, if not in the dialogue itself? Whence does it get this attitude? Answering this question is our next task in outlining Niebuhr's ethics of rhetoric. We've seen that the prophetic task is to critique the pride of collectives that manifest in its public discourses. From this, we must now inquire about the attitudes that these collectives must bring to the conversation, if the dialogue with the prophetic voice is to bear ethical fruits.

Prophetic Aspiration: Faith and Hope Beyond Tragedy

Jeremiah and Second Isaiah together, poets of pathos and amazement, speak in laments and doxologies. They cannot be torn from each other. Reading Jeremiah alone leaves faith in death where God finally will not stay. And reading Second Isaiah alone leads us to imagine that we may receive comfort without tears and tearing. Clearly, only those who anguish will sing new songs. Without anguish the new song is likely to be strident and just more royal fakery.

—Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*

If he wants to convict Detroit of her sins he preaches a sermon on the city of God, and lets all the limitations of this get-rich-quick metropolis of merge by implication. If he wants to flay the denominationalism of the churches he speaks on some topic which gives him the chance delineate the ideal and inclusive church. On the whole, people do not achieve great moral heights of a sense of duty. You may be able to compel them to maintain certain minimum standards by stressing duty, but the highest moral in spiritual achievements depend not upon a push but upon a pull. People must be charmed into righteousness. The language of aspiration rather than that of criticism and command is the proper pulpit language. Of course it has its limitations. In every congregation there are a few perverse sinners who can go into emotional ecstasies about the city of God and yet not see how they are helping to make their city a hell-hole. It is not a good thing to convict sin only by implication. Sometimes the cruel word of censure must be uttered. “Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites” was spoken by one who incarnated tenderness. The language of aspiration is always in danger of becoming soft; but it is possible to avoid that pitfall and yet not sink into a habit of cheap scolding.

—Niebuhr, *Leaves*

Niebuhr’s thoughtful reflection on pulpit rhetoric gives us some rhetorical terms to work with regarding this prophetic balance. For those preachers who have the habit of “scolding” he offers his brother’s sermons as a corrective model, “his technique in uniting religious emotion with aspiration rather than with duty” (*Leaves*, 75). Niebuhr finds himself in the eternal rhetorical struggle, which every prophet faces, as does every social movement leader and rhetor today. It occurs over and over again throughout Niebuhr’s works, though it is articulated differently. In 1927, he stated the problem in these terms: “Moral idealism

which fails to gauge the measure of resistance which its ideals must meet in the confused realities of life or to fashion adequate weapons for its conflict degenerates into mere sentimentality. But a social intelligence which is overwhelmed by the discouraging realities and despairs of the attainment of any ideal sinks into a morally enervating cynicism” (DCNR, 161-62). In *Moral Man*, the task was articulated in similar terms, with the addition of metaphors of movement, the threat of “fanaticism” and its dialectical partner, “inertia.” Herein lies reason that Niebuhr’s ethics is always an ethics of *rhetoric*, for he understands politics as power, and as such, he gives us a way to talk about rhetoric as a dynamic power of coercion that *moves* human beings in concerted action toward ideal goods. What makes his rhetoric ethical is that it looks upon the reality of appearances realistically, approaches the future pragmatically, and views mankind ironically. All three of these things, according to Niebuhr’s reading, are the permanent insights and imperatives of the Christian myth. They take us beyond even the Hebraic truths because they take us beyond the tragedy of prophetic lamentation and criticism, beyond even the hope of Isaiah, becomes it fulfills it. Christ enters the world, thereby making appearances meaningful; Christ tries to improve the world by making politics more just and personal relationships more loving, thereby approaching the future pragmatically, building toward the vision of the Kingdom of God, reaching after the impossible possibility; Christ declares profoundly and paradoxically—as paradox is the language of irony, the opposite of common sense—that he who loses his life shall gain it, that he that tries to save his life will lose it, a transvaluation of our ultimate values and a truth attested to by the fact that 2,000 years later, He lives.

Christ then, as we will see, was for Niebuhr the ultimate revelation of the ironic attitude that leads to ethical action. It is the necessary combatant of moral apathy and

social inertia, for doing the right thing for others requires moral energy, heroic logic, faith. Niebuhr writes: "If reality only thinly veiled the ideal implicit in it, or if the implicit ideal is certain to become real in history, there is no occasion for moral adventure and no reason for moral enthusiasm" (*DCNR*, 202-203). In light of this, note that Burke sees comedy as dealing with *man in society* and tragedy as dealing with *cosmic man* (1984, 42). If this is true, then Niebuhr would certainly argue that Christ collapses these two into one ironic symbol; Christ, by entering history, becomes the *cosmic man in society*. This can be nothing less than the vision of perfection in imperfection, the impossible possibility that leads to moral energy. His tragi-comic role is given the name "The Son of Man" (Son of Adam) and is dramatized as the Passion. The universal becomes a particular that embodies the universal-particular. Sacred and Profane collapse, as the sacred reveals itself in the profane, making the profane sacred and making the sacred prone to profanation. The dramatic moral adventure gives us a reason for moral enthusiasm, in light of all the facts around us that lead us to despair and dismay. We are able to get beyond tragedy.

John E. Smith argues that one cannot fully appreciate Niebuhr's prophetic insight into American history without understanding what he meant by irony and how this relates to the Christian worldview (2009, 51). Niebuhr was often at pains to distinguish irony, not from comedy, as we may suspect, but from tragedy. Tragedy, Niebuhr knew, was about the dilemmas that arise when we must choose between equally valid loyalties. Niebuhr also knew that it painted a picture of man as guilty whenever he used his creative capacities, which being given to him by God, seemed not quite right. Thus, the purely tragic view was neither viable nor Christian, for according to his faith, man was given dominion over the earth and tasked with making it better, so tragedy could not be the final summation of the

human drama. Smith writes, “Irony goes beyond tragedy; it involves an interpretation of human evil that, in Niebuhr’s view, coincides with the Christian conception of sinful man and in turn goes beyond irony, ending in a redemption that must come from contrition and repentance” (ibid., 51). “Man,” as Niebuhr saw him, “is an ironic creature because he forgets that he is not simply a creator but also a creature,” and everyone is guilty of making this mistake (*IAM*). The biblical reading of history validates this view, Niebuhr argued, as demonstrated in the prophetic summation of the tower of Babel, and the repeated exiles and failures of the Hebrew people. These falls were always about a people’s virtue becoming a destructive vice, after making pretentious claims about their own virtue.

The Christian path from pathos to tragedy, and from tragedy to irony, is best demonstrated in one of Niebuhr’s sermonic essays, “Christianity and Tragedy” from his collection *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (1937). In this essay Niebuhr analyzes a passage from Luke. Luke tells us that when Christ was marched to Golgotha, where he was to be crucified, some women followed behind him on the path “bemoaning and lamenting him.” Christ, en route to experiencing one of the more tortuous and grueling methods of capital punishment the creative imaginations of mankind has devised, turns to the women and says, “Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me; but weep for yourselves and for your children” (Luke 23:27-29). Here is pathos par excellence. Anyone whose ever looked around at the world and, surveying its scenes—from the holocaust’s overwhelming images of death and hate-realized, to the evening news stories of a small child whose Christian parents refused to “spare the rod”—and asked in sadness and frustration, “What is wrong with this world?” has experienced history as pathetic. Niebuhr notes, “Pity is curiously mixed with both love and reverence” and “love for equals is

difficult" (*BT*, 155). We typically empathize with what is weak and suffers because it appeals to our strength without challenging it, Niebuhr argues; yet, we also revere those who suffer because of their strength or nobility. With this reverence, we leave the realm of pure pathos and enter into the realm of tragedy. Jesus, Niebuhr notes, is usually considered a tragic figure, but this is a superficial reading, for it isn't correct (*ibid.*). Niebuhr corrects this assumption, writing: "Christianity is a religion which transcends tragedy. Tears, with death, are swallowed up in victory. The cross is not tragic but the resolution of tragedy." Christianity's tears are not for the Christian's suffering and death; they are tears of pity for "those who do not understand life profoundly enough to escape the chaos of impulse and chance by which most lives are determined" (*ibid.*, 156). Weep for yourselves, Christ says, and weep for your children. It is as if he were saying, you are pitiful, while I am tragic.

True tragedy, Niebuhr notes, features a hero who defies malignant power to assert the integrity of his soul. This hero suffers because he is strong, not weak. It is not his vice that involves him in guilt, but his virtue. It is the level of life that is achieved by only a few for, as Niebuhr notes, "Most men perish in weakness, frustration and confusion." We may weep for these weak men, but our tears are not cathartic, for though we pity them, there is no terror to fear in their sad lives, determined only by their silly passions and unfortunate circumstances. These characters aren't tragic, as they come from authorial attitudes saturated with the gloom and melancholy of a thoroughgoing pessimism. "Surely Nietzsche was right in his assertion," Niebuhr argues, "that tragedy stands beyond pessimism and optimism" (*ibid.*, 157). This must say something about man, who sees the pitiful character

as someone familiar and not strange. It must be that much of actual life is lived on this plane of pessimism and pity, Niebuhr concludes.

This pity is often even greater for these pitiful characters because they do not weep for themselves. Pitiful characters never rise above their fate and survey its meaning; they never subdue the confusions of life that cause their pain. Pity then, is the view of the spectator and not the actors of the drama, for only the spectator discerns meanings that are not beheld by the participants. Niebuhr concludes that the most thoroughgoing realists may not be able to write tragedy “because in actual life pathos overwhelms tragedy and the spectator feels only pity without reverence” (ibid., 157-80). What pitiful characters need is a greater degree of comprehension of the forces that determine their action, so they can arouse some heroic defiance of the Fate that hurls them toward destruction. Niebuhr’s reading of pity and tragedy is nuanced. He notes that the “so-called tragic victims of warfare” aren’t tragic at all. Their courage and loyalty to the cause only deliver them more assuredly into the hands of “all the blind and anarchic forces” that set nations against nations. It is not courage and loyalty that makes a tragic hero, or else every character in the *Iliad* would be the tragic hero and Achilles wouldn’t have stood out from the armies of the Athenians. “The really tragic hero of warfare” Niebuhr writes:

... is not the soldier who makes the greatest sacrifice but the occasional discerning spirit who plunges into the chaos of war with a full understanding of its dark, unconscious sources in the human psyche and an equal resolution, either to defy these forces or to submit himself as their tool and victim in recognition of his common humanity with those who are unconscious victims. (ibid.)

However, Niebuhr notes, it’s impossible to reserve pure tragedy only for the occasional hero of nobility and strength, and to comprehend daily life as only pathetic. The two are always compounded. Genuine tragedy is always composed partly of pitiful elements as well,

for all heroes demonstrate strength and weakness, noble purposes and blindness. Othello's love of Desdemona ensnares him in a murderous jealousy; King Lear's love and obtuseness, lead him to love his daughters that hate him and hate the daughter that loves him. Both Othello and King Lear are genuinely tragic figures because their strength becomes the source of their weakness. Both Othello and King Lear mirror a reality of human existence, Niebuhr argues, revealed whenever men, while suffering, manifest strength and dignity, thereby lifting the pitiful into a nobler category and transmuting weakness into sublimity (ibid., 160). Here, Niebuhr also includes those otherwise pitiful characters that deal with life's pain and misery with noble courage and bravery.

Pure tragedy goes beyond these forms of tragedy, according to Niebuhr, because in pure-tragedy the suffering is self-inflicted. Instead of transmuting the suffering into courage and strength—as Achilles transmutes the suffering of disgrace at the hands of Agamemnon and the suffering of his grief over Patroclus' death into rage that spurs him to victory on the battlefield—the purely tragic hero initiates the suffering by his own act. This is the pure tragedy of Sophocles and Aeschylus, whose heroes defy God or violate moral codes in the name of a higher principle. It manifests in two forms: the Promethean and the Dionysian tragedy. The Promethean tragedy is the best example of pure tragedy because it notes the perennial self-destruction that comes when man's pride and hubris cause him to reach higher than he should. Zeus, who is just, but not loving, is aroused to jealousy and becomes vindictive. Greek tragedy, Niebuhr notes, sees the problem of man correctly, but it sees no solution to the problem. Aeschylus insists again and again that man must observe the law of measure, which became the foundation of Aristotle's prudential ethics; yet, the "heroes of Aeschylus are tragically noble precisely because they disregard the author's

pious advice.” For this reason, the Aeschylian *plot* is much more profound than the Aeschylian *philosophy*, Niebuhr notes, for it sees that in addition to man’s rational faculty, man has an imagination, one that surveys the stars and aspires to reach them, and it recognizes that this is the root of all human creativity and the source of all human evil.

The Promethean form of tragedy is not a dominant one in Greek poetry. It is only expressed clearly in *Prometheus Bound* and in most other tragedies by Sophocles and Aeschylus, the theme is Dionysian. The difference is that in the former, a semi-god consciously tries to undermine the authority of God, while in the latter, heroic men consciously affirm an unconscious human impulse in defiance of society’s conventions and society’s moral laws. Though the hero is guilty, the emphasis in Dionysian tragedy is on how they cover their guilt with primitive, powerful and partly unconscious passions of the soul. In Promethean tragedy, human imagination breaks the forms of prudent morality as it strives toward the infinite; in Dionysian tragedy, human imagination expresses impulses and passions that lay below the consciousness of ordinary men and result in consequences outside the bounds of decency (*ibid.*, 163). Combined, the two cover the heights (pride and hubris) and depths (sensuality) of existence, one that a morality of prudence can neither comprehend fully nor restrain. Their heroes are not mere victims but willfully affirm in themselves what is considered faulty in lesser men. The Dionysian impulse is romantic and affirms the whole of life, whatever the consequences, including the Promethean will, which is an aristocratic virtue precisely because it is the opposite of Aristotle’s and Plato’s prudential aristocrat, who tempers emotion with reason. The weakness of the tragic hero, most notable to Niebuhr, is that he is always crying “weep for me.” “He needs a chorus to extol his virtues and justify his actions. He requires lesser men to appreciate his true

greatness" (ibid., 164). Thus, in Greek tragedy there is a sustained element of self-pity. The "necessity of pity from the lesser men who keep the law for the greater men who break it out of an inner necessity is the symbol of an unresolved conflict in the heart of Greek tragedy." Niebuhr argues that Greek tragedy does not know where the real center of life lies, whether in life's laws or in life's vitality. Thus, "the weak law-abiders must honor the strong law-breakers, lest the latter seem dishonorable" (ibid., 165).

Although the Christian view and Greek view of life have many differences, they are also similar. Both, according to Niebuhr, "measure life in the same depth" and "neither gives itself to the simple delusion that the titanic forces of human existence" can be easily controlled by a scheme of rational prudence. Furthermore, both agree that guilt and creativity are inextricably interwoven. However, the Christian view is that guilt is not inevitable in all human creativity, which means that sin is not normative or natural. Sin, according to the Christian myth, does emerge out of human freedom and is possible only because man is free; "but it is done in freedom, and therefore man and not life bears the responsibility for it" (ibid., 166). Sin accompanies every creative act, but it is not part of the creativity. It comes from man's self-centeredness and egotism by which he destroys life and life's harmony. That man does this is not an occasion for admiration, but for pity. Sin, no matter how much we qualify its tragic elements, is pitiful. Thus, "weep for yourselves."

Yet Christianity takes man beyond this pitiful situation. Christ does not die upon the cross because he has sinned but because he hasn't. This death proves then that sin is so much a part of our existence that sinlessness cannot exist within it. Yet, since Christ is not only *cosmic man*, but is also *man in society*, he demonstrates that sin is not a necessary and inherent characteristic of life. Christ reveals in history the essential goodness of his

creation. Christ, though defeated in history, proves in that very defeat that he cannot be ultimately defeated. He is a symbol that the ultimate source of our existence swallows up evil and destroys it. Life is also able, not only of doing good, but of also destroying the evil which has been produced in it (ibid., 168). Thus, Christ, in saying “Weep not for me” stands beyond tragedy. Niebuhr writes:

If there are tears for this man on the cross they cannot be tears of “pity and terror.” The cross does not reveal life at cross purposes with itself. On the contrary, it declares that what seems to be an inherent defect in life itself is really a contingent defect in the soul of each man, the defect of the sin which he commits in his freedom. If he can realize that fact, if he can weep for himself, if he can repent, he can also be saved. He can be saved by hope and faith. His hope and faith will separate the character of life in its essential reality from life as it is revealed in sinful history. (ibid.)

In this way the, the man on the cross is also able, in saying, “weep not for me,” to save us from our tears of self-pity. Self-pity, after Christ’s death on the cross, is transmuted “into tears of remorse and repentance.” Repentance, Niebuhr notes, doesn’t accuse life or God but accuses the self. There, in that responsible and repentant self-accusation, lies the beginning of hope and salvation, for if the defect is not in life itself, but in us, then life is never hopeless. “If we can only weep for ourselves as men we need not weep for ourselves as man” (ibid., 169). In this sense then, the Christian myth is an ironic one, which leads to the humble and tolerant attitude that genuine democracy thrives on. The reason is that men, thus prompted to humility, may differ in their ideals, but they will know themselves one in the fact that they must differ, that their differences are rooted in natural and historic circumstances and that these differences rise to sinful proportions beyond anything which nature knows. Niebuhr writes:

They will not regard either their unities or differences in moral ideals as unimportant. They will know that men are called upon to make fateful decisions in human history and that these decisions sometimes set a son at variance with his

father and a daughter with her mother. To subordinate the righteousness to which they are devoted under the righteousness of God does not mean to be less loyal to any cause to which conscience prompts them. Yet they will know that they are finite and sinful men, contending against others who are equally finite and equally sinful. Here the religious perspective crosses the moral perspective in such a way that there is always a possibility that men will be beguiled from devotion to the most genuine moral duties they know. But at its best the sense of Christian humility does not destroy moral ardour. It merely destroys moral arrogance and prevents righteousness from denigrating into self-righteousness. (ibid., 246-7)

Getting beyond tragedy means getting beyond what is tragic in human existence, the clash of conflicting principles in a time of crisis, the fork in the road of contingency that demands we choose the lesser evil or the greater good at the cost of perfection, ideals and absolutes. "No amount of pressure from an itinerant 'prophet' can change the fact that a minister is bound to be a statesman," argues Niebuhr; he must deal with situations as well as principles. "In specific situations, actions must be judged not only in terms of absolute standards but in consideration of available resources in the lives of those whom the minister leads." The prophet then, as a prophet-technician, is tasked with experiencing tragedy as a statesman who leads people in concerted action; he must be willing and able, not only to condemn the Egyptian pharaoh, not only to persuade his people to leave the order of Egypt and head for an imagined promised land that no man has seen, but he must also be willing and able to escort his congregation, his city, and his nation through the wilderness. Choosing the right course of action, i.e. leaving Egypt, isn't enough to evade tragedy, because we can't know all of the factors involved in our decisions, i.e. that God will force us to roam in the wilderness for forty years, that the only thing that will make the trip to the promised land is Joseph's bones, that we will have to enter into a new covenant that will hold our people more responsible for evil than any other on earth.

Beyond tragedy means that another covenant is coming. A new promise is made, the future is opened up, the impossible possibility seems a little less impossible, and in death there is life. The prophet speaks these possibilities into the collective imagination with the hope, as Niebuhr states it, that ideas may lead to action. The ultimate hope is, in some sense, the fulfillment of life. There is no religion or philosophy of life that doesn't hope for the fulfillment of life in some form or another. Niebuhr writes of this hope: "Since it is man's nature to be emancipated of the tyranny of the immediate present and to transcend the processes of nature in which he is involved, he cannot exist without having his eyes upon the future" (*BT*, 305). Tomorrow, something new may happen. Tomorrow, there is resurrection, new life, a small chance that one may will oneself to *Be* something different than they were yesterday, thereby changing the course of dramatic history. "The future," Niebuhr writes, "is the symbol of man's freedom." Discerned ironically, history yields a "frame of meaning in which human freedom is real and valid and not merely tragic or illusory," Niebuhr argues (*IAM*, 168). Christianity complicates the future because it insists that the very freedom that brings the future into view is the occasion for the corruption of the present in the heart of man (*BT*, 306). Simply becoming what he is currently on course to become cannot save man, because this development will only heighten all the contradictions he lives in. Emancipating himself from the "march of time" and the law of becoming by choosing to enter into a timeless and motionless eternity cannot save him either, for mysticism and asectism doesn't ever save man—it can only annihilate him.

Beyond tragedy means that man's hope lies in forgiveness, not for being human, an animal, a finite creature, but forgiveness for corrupting his freedom by loving himself and the extensions of himself. His hope lies in this forgiveness and a divine omnipotence,

someone who will complete his life without destroying his essential nature. Thus, Niebuhr argues, the Apostolic Creed is the final expression of man's hope and is a much more sophisticated expression of hope in ultimate fulfillment than all of its modern substitutes, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting." The creed grows out of a realization of the total human situation, which the modern mind has not yet fathomed, Niebuhr argues. Though the symbols by which this hope is expressed are difficult for rational minds to comprehend, modern man's rejection of the symbols has little to do with their irrationality. The real cause of the rejection of the message that goes beyond tragedy, according to Niebuhr, is that modern man has failed, and continues to fail, to understand the problem of human existence in all its complexity. Modern man has not, as is often assumed, substituted superior scientific ideas for outmoded religious myths; rather, he is simply blind to the paradoxes of human existence (300). Man doesn't understand the hopes of unconditioned perfection, both social and individual, which beckon the human conscience and are involved in every concept of the relative and historical good. "He sees them in history but does not see that they point beyond history."

Perhaps times have changed a bit since Niebuhr's, where at the turn of the century man thought he could control the world with science and logic and technics. Today we live in a world where the collective sins of our "intelligence" are constantly pointing, not to our ability to succeed and harness the natural world at our discretion, but to our limits and the certainty that tomorrow will be just like today. In such a world, the character of rhetoric is uncertain at best (1993, 139). But in the midst of this uncertainty, Farrell asks us to remember, "that the experience of tragedy, even in its archetypal, perfected state, is not the final experience. It is only the archetypal *aesthetic* experience. The comedy of history does

not stop. In some perverse but necessary sense, the murmuring of survivors goes on and is rekindled" (ibid.). These survivors are the reoccurring promise of a saving remnant of spiritualized-technicians. They survey the world realistically and have a keen intelligence. They are experimental and experienced, well-versed in the language of the laity, and they do not denigrate, but instead revere the common-sense wisdom of the man on the street that Aristotle called phronesis. They are humble and qualify their judgments continually, for theirs is a pluralistic and humble attitude; yet, when the chips are down and contingency rears its head, they are brave and courageous in defending the cause of justice. Though their rhetoric is certain and unwavering in the face of injustice, they nevertheless will express in their deepest reflections an attitude that Kierkegaard expressed as "fear and trembling." So it was with Niebuhr's last journal entry:

It is almost impossible to be sane and Christian at the same time, and on the whole I have been more sane than Christian. I have said what I believe, but in my creed the divine madness of a gospel of love is qualified by considerations of moderation which I have called Aristotelian, but which an unfriendly critic might call opportunistic. I have made these qualifications because it seems to me that without them the Christian ethic degenerates into asceticism and becomes useless for any direction of the affairs of a larger city. I do not say that some one ought not to undertake an ascetic revolt against civilization. Certainly there would be a peace in it which no one can find who tries to adapt the principles of love to a civilization built upon the drive of power and greed. Those of us who make adjustments between the absolute ideal of our devotion and the necessities of the immediate situation lack peace, because we can never be sure that we have our adjustment at the right place.

Niebuhr, *Leaves*

It is a beautiful and pitiful refrain, which are characteristic of tragic catharsis. Yet it is not a tragic story. It is the story of a humble and contrite liberal who, as Niebuhr describes his mission, attempts to "combine the ethic of Jesus with what might be called Greek caution" (*Leaves*, 152). The tragic hero throws caution to the wind. The tragic hero makes judgments

confidently and knows nothing of Niebuhr's feelings of a "lack of peace" that comes from compromising principles in the name of contingency, prudence, *phronesis*. Niebuhr's task, as a prophet, was to further the ironic, the comi-tragic, view of human history, in order to foster an ethical attitude of humility and reverence in political affairs. He sums up the journal entry, his last in the book, with the following:

Modern industry, particularly American industry, is not Christian. The economic forces which move it are hardly qualified at a single point by really ethical considerations. If, while it is in the flush of its early triumphs, it may seem impossible to bring it under the restraint of moral law, it may strengthen faith to know that life without law destroys itself. If the church can do nothing else, it can *bear witness to the truth until such a day as bitter experience will force a recalcitrant civilization to a humility which it does not now possess.* (emphasis mine, 152)

Here is Niebuhr's faith at its finest. Niebuhr is girding his loins, as the prophets would have it, before he embarks for New York, mustering up the courage and strength he will need to continue preaching the gospel to a prideful nation. His faith in God's ultimate judgment is the only thing that can get him beyond tragedy and irony, to what may be called "ironic irony."⁴⁹ These are, as the title of his journal calls our attention to, the *Confessions of a Tamed Cynic*. As Kierkegaard's Climacus notes, "From the fact that irony is present it does not follow that earnestness is excluded. That is something only assistant professors assume." Niebuhr, and his formulation of a prophet-technician, can be summed up ably under Kierkegaard's aphorism: Ever *ironic*, yet *earnest*—or to flip the clauses and substitute Niebuhr's preference for the gospel's summation—*In the world, not of it*.

⁴⁹ See, (Lear 2012)

Conclusion

The new myth, to be the ideal myth, must give us that new vision, and not merely in its purity, as with the Christian vision of peace on earth, but in its ideological implications as well. And maybe it must do this very soon. Or must the myth wait for quiet times, as Virgil's myth celebrated the *end* of wars? And if it must, what will there be for the new myth to celebrate, if the magic number three is to have its sway, if there is to be a third world war?

—Kenneth Burke, *Ideology and Myth*

The Christian myth, properly understood, was the perfect democratic myth for Niebuhr. Niebuhr notes that the prophetic and ironic elements in a religious myth do not inevitably lead to ethical activity and that many forms of Christianity “play the part of chaplain to the pride of nations” (*NDMI*, 216). The church can become, just as the state can, the vehicle of collective egotism because, “Every truth can be made the servant of sinful arrogance, including the prophetic truth that all men fall short of the truth” (*ibid.*, 217). Nevertheless, reconfiguring appearances aesthetically, the prophet, the spiritualized-technician, stimulates the ethical imagination of her audience. Appearances take on new life in the Christian interpretation of history, as Niebuhr presents it. The limits of our individual imaginations are multiplied in collective existence, and this is at the root of the ethical problem; however, Niebuhr recognizes amidst human sin a potential solution by way of the Christian myth. Realism alone is the benefactor of complacency with the status quo. “We need to ask,” writes Brueggemann, “not whether it is realistic or practical or viable but whether it is *imaginable*” for “Imagination must come before implementation” (2001, 39-40).

Niebuhr's survey of the church's potential for success in the cause of justice was dismal; but he notes that the church was in many ways the only group that had the

symbolic resources already in place to take on the task. The church body was congenial to the “energy and activism of Western peoples and is yet capable of setting bounds to its expansive desires.” A model of self-assertion by self-denial was already in place in its doctrines; the cross was the symbol of life’s highest achievement. “Its optimism is rooted in pessimism and it is therefore able to reach both repentance and hope. It is able to condemn the world without enervating life and to create faith without breeding illusions.” (*DCNR*, 235-6). In other words, the church was an organization that already had the proper mythical symbols in place to take on the task of social reconstruction. “When dealing with life’s ultimates, symbolism is indispensable,” Niebuhr writes, “and a symbolism which has a basis in historic incident is most effective” (*ibid.*, 237). A morally creative worldview requires, Niebuhr argued, “a potent but yet suffering divine ideal which is defeated by the world but gains its victory in the defeat.” In other words, a corrective to the problems of modernity must be a tragic worldview that goes beyond tragedy because its tragedy transcends the meaning of what it means to fail.

Niebuhr was unaware at the time he penned *Man’s Nature and His Communities* that Martin Luther King, Jr. was using his works for inspiration and guidance.⁵⁰ So it is a profound coincidence, an ironic one even, that Niebuhr’s survey of the civil rights movement echoed those very themes King pulled from Niebuhr’s thought. While arguing that the 1954 Supreme Court decision to desegregate schools initiated the Negro revolt, Niebuhr described the process as one that took the African-American population beyond tragedy. The Supreme Court decision “transmuted the desperation of the minority into that wonderful combination of hope and despair, which has been the motive power of all

⁵⁰ (Niebuhr 1965) (hereafter cited as *MNC*).

rebellions against injustice” (ibid., 102). Yet, it was not King that got schools to desegregate. It began in Topeka, Kansas, when thirteen parents, on behalf of their twenty children, filed a lawsuit against the Board of Education. The plaintiffs were encouraged to file the suit by the Topeka NAACP president, McKinley Burnett, who had been writing letters to the Topeka School Board for two year to encourage desegregation. When reviewed by the Supreme Court, all nine justices overturned the ruling of the Topeka district court to enforce segregation unanimously. With these facts, we return to Niebuhr’s conclusion to *Does Civilization Need Religion?*

The modern movement of detachment must be a layman’s movement; “for it must express itself in rebuilding the *social order* rather than in rebuilding *new social institutions*” (DCNR, 228, *emphasis mine*). The most effective teachers of this movement will “lack neither the technical skill nor the spiritual resource to deal with the practical problems of industry and politics” (ibid.). The movement will prove ineffective if those engaged in the world’s work are not at the mast. The prophet’s task, Brueggemann argues, “is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative” to that of the dominant culture (2001, 3). This alternative consciousness serves to criticize the dominant one, while also serving to energize communities in the hope of something better to come (ibid.) Imagination comes before implementation, and the imagination of only a few, a saving remnant of those involved in life’s work—eleven parents in Topeka or nine supreme court justices—may prove that Niebuhr’s summation in *Moral Man* was correct:

There must always be a religious element in the hope of a just society. Without the ultrarational hopes and passions of religion no society will ever have the courage to conquer despair and attempt the impossible; for the vision of a just society is an impossible one, which can be approximated only by those who do not regard it as impossible. The true visions of religion are illusions, which may be partially realized

by being resolutely believed. For what religion believes to be true is not wholly true but ought to be true; and may become true if its truth is not doubted. (*MM*, 81)

What is religion? It is “the courageous logic which makes the ethical struggle consistent with the world’s facts;” it “validates its sublime assumptions in immediate experience and gives man an unshakable certainty;” thus, it “becomes the dynamic of moral action as well as the logic which makes the action reasonable” (*DCNR*, 53). The spiritualized-technician then, provides the moral energy and action needed to move collectives toward social justice as an ideal that can be approximated but never perfectly actualized. Thus, the spiritualized-technician, the prophet, must have “the wisdom of serpents” and “the guilelessness of doves” if they are to aid in the moral regeneration of society. Niebuhr’s formulation echoes Burke’s vision of the ideal myth, one that transcends the political and yet has political attitudes interwoven into it.⁵¹ The wisdom of serpents means recognizing that the lawsuit and civil disobedience are the means for changing structures based on power, not love and forgiveness. The guilelessness of doves means that the civil disobedience be non-violent and that the movement, with an element of naïve hope and faith its ideals, remain detached from the politics of power whenever possible.

Appearances come to us from the unknown future. In preparing for them ethically, we can only control our attitudes toward history and its actors: friends, families, and communities—our own and other’s. Appearances stare us down in the present, and *present*

⁵¹ (Burke and Gusfield 1989, 208) Burke notes the motivational problem that arises, if you treat the mythic narrative as on par with the ideological motives. Burke argues that if we eliminate the ideological taint or bias then we deprive society of its motive power. “For though bias is false promise, it is promise.” This was Mannheim’s problem, as well as Niebuhr’s. For Mannheim asks himself the same question Niebuhr does in the conclusion of *Moral Man*, and that is “where the zeal of human effort would come from, if it were not for the false promises of our utopias. And he asks this, [as Niebuhr does] even as he aims by scrupulous method to destroy the zeal of such false promises, or mythic utopian illusions.

us with a crisis in which a judgment must be made. The ethic of our responses will depend upon entering the crisis with a humble attitude and contrite heart, which it is the prophet's task to evoke; as well as our capacity for rational decision-making, the amount of information we have on the particular problem at hand, and a realistic survey of the power relations involved, which are the technician's and statesman's highest calling. Appearances, once gone, are recollected in both individual and collective memories, passed down from generation to generation. These shared experiences make up a community's ethos. The quality of this ethos depends up the dramatic and mythic interpretations it uses to frame these collective memories; it depends on whether they are fundamentally tragic, or if they provide a ray of light to the world that takes man and society beyond tragedy and despair. This light that takes us beyond tragedy completes the circular movement of a Niebuhrian ethics of Christian rhetoric; for only if we believe in man's freedom and the impossible possibility that man *can* do better, will we be able to do the first task: approach the appearances of the future with an open mind, a contrite spirit and a humble heart.

Conclusion

The Niebuhrian Rhetoric of King David and Abraham Lincoln

Any society that hopes to be imperishable must carve out for itself a piece of space and period of time in which it can look honestly at itself. This honesty is not that of the scientist, who exchanges the honesty of his ego for the objectivity of his gaze. It is, rather, akin to the extreme honesty of the creative artist who, in his presentations on the stage, in the book, on canvas, in marble, in music, or in towers and houses, reserves to himself the privilege of seeing straight what all cultures build crooked. All generalizations are in some way skewed, and artists with candid vision “labor well the particulars,” as Blake knew.

—Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Experience*

Let the study serve to reveal the relativity of all things so that pulpit utterances do not become too extravagant, and let the pulpit save the student from sinking in the sea of relativities. However qualified every truth may be there is nevertheless a portion in every truth and value which is essentially absolute and which is therefore worth proclaiming. “All oratory,” declares a Greek scholar, “is based on half truths.” That is why one ought naturally to distrust and to discount the orator. On the other hand, oratory may be the result of the kind of poetic gift which sees a truth dissociated, for a moment at least, from all relativities of time and circumstance and lifted into the light of the absolute.

Niebuhr, *Leaves*

Niebuhr also struggled to find the right balance between prophetic scolding and priestly encouragement, between didactic and dialogic elements of his ministry. Niebuhr wondered “Why is that when I arise in the pulpit I try to be imaginative and am sometimes possessed by a kind of madness which makes my utterances extravagant and dogmatic?” (34) “Perhaps,” he thought, it is due to “my desire to move the audience” from their lethargy, a difficult task for a “cool and critical analysis.” Rousing the emotions demands, instead, a presentation of ideal values, he concludes. Niebuhr also noted that this tendency to become fanatical or hyperbolic increased as the size of his congregation grew. “A full church gives me the sense of fighting with a victorious host in the battles of the Lord”

whereas, “A half empty church immediately symbolizes the fact that Christianity is very much of a minority movement in a pagan world and that it can be victorious only by snatching victory out of defeat.” Niebuhr constantly gauged his oratory’s priestly and prophetic balances, checking that his ethics remained rhetorically potent and that his rhetoric remained ethical, i.e. that it both condemn and aspire.

It is dangerous to make coherence the standard by which all truths are measured. “Irrational,” “illogical,” and “pre-scientific” are often mistaken adjectives, used to falsely denote what is supra-rational, ultra-rational, and supra-scientific. There are truths that are permanent, truths that seem to dissociate from the contingencies of the shifting sands we make political judgments on. In today’s high-speed world, where everything is sped up and the world around us seems to spiral out of our control so often, Niebuhr would undoubtedly call our attention to two things: Permanent truths are needed now, more than ever, and likewise, the very reasons they are needed are the very things blocking us from grasping them. What are the chances for prophetic oratory in times such as these?

Recalling the introduction of our analysis, we may note that, though the present seems too fast and technological for permanent truths, it is Obama’s rhetoric that has revived the rhetorical trope “Niebuhrian.” This fact is more significant when we connect the present “Niebuhrian” rhetorical utterances with those of the past, those that Niebuhr specifically points to as rhetorical models, perfect embodiments of the tensions between permanent truth and discriminating intelligence, justice and love, condemnation and aspiration. There is an ancient model of rhetoric that harmoniously blends priestly aspiration and prophetic condemnation, and that is found in the story of King David. There is only one such American rhetoric. It is found in the Presidential addresses of Abraham

Lincoln, Niebuhr's—as well as Obama's—favorite statesman. In Lincoln, Niebuhr heard the perfect articulation of the balance needed between priestly and prophetic utterance, between loyalties to the ark and loyalties to the temple.

The story begins with the first building of the Jewish temple, recorded in First and Second Chronicles. David, the only person in the Bible whom it is said “was a man after God’s own heart,” sits on the throne of Israel—an Israel he united by waging war against Judah and capturing Jerusalem. David has spent years designing a “house of rest for the ark of the covenant;” the porch, the houses, the treasuries, the upper chambers—David had architectural designs for every detail of the temple. God however, has other plans. God, who has made a covenant with David that his house shall sit on the throne of Israel forever, informs David later that because he has blood on his hands, he will not be allowed to build the sacred temple. His son Solomon, who is chosen to build it instead, records the conversation: “Now it was in the heart of David my father to build an house for the name of the Lord God of Israel. But the Lord said to David my father, Forasmuch as it was in thine heart to build an house for my name, thou didst well in that it was in thine heart: Notwithstanding thou shalt not build the house” (II Chronicles 6). It is a tragic story, for by all accounts David waged a just and necessary war for God’s people, even executing the assassins of the king of Judah for war crimes. It is ironic, of course, that David is most remembered by Protestants for his heroic defeat of the giant Goliath, and by Jews for his unification of the two tribes into one nation in Jerusalem, Israel. The one man who has a heart for God, who unites the tribes into one kingdom, and whose motives for building God a house in Israel are pure and noble, is punished for doing the right thing.

Niebuhr's exegesis of this narrative is significant, for it is fair to say that it is an analysis of how gods, ultimate terms, what Burke calls "god-terms," are invoked on behalf of nations during times of war. In every war that David engaged in on behalf of Israel, Niebuhr notes, "the ark of the covenant accompanied him, guaranteeing, as it were, the presence and help of the God of his fathers in his battles" (*BT*, 51). The presence of the ark symbolizes the fact that, as Niebuhr puts it; "all men are men of God in their warfare." It is this that distinguishes them from animals, Niebuhr notes.⁵² Not since the most primitive of tribes has man fought merely for existence, for human life is more than mere existence and human society is more than an association of people. Society is "bound to the past and is therefore a sacred brotherhood. Values which transcend its immediate existence are always involved in its conflicts" (*ibid.*, 52). The ark then, is a symbol of every culture religion: religions that bind together the highest values of their devotion and their own existence. Primitive gods were tribal gods but the deities of early cultures and civilizations pointed beyond the tribe, "symbols of a profound and disturbing reality in the spiritual life of man." Culture gods were Janus-faced, Niebuhr notes; they pointed to both the immediate and the ultimate. They glorify one culture's existence and, pointing beyond their existence, lead them outside the bounds of their culture toward ultimate and total fulfillment. The gods of culture religion are always gods of battle, helping them gain victory in the battle because they are little more than *just* gods of battle.

Examples that attest to Niebuhr's position abound. The *Pax Romana* was a Roman peace based on Roman arms, but it was more than *just* a Roman peace because its peace benefited both the subjects and the victims of Rome. Social peace, Rome's god, transcended

⁵² Again, Niebuhr and Burke are remarkably similar in their analyses of these themes. See, (Burke 1970).

Roman power. "The god of bourgeois society is more than bourgeois society" Niebuhr argues; he is "the god of liberty, democracy and fraternity" and Niebuhr notes quickly, "he is also the god of battles." Every one of these "universal values" is profitable and necessary for bourgeois existence to maintain itself, and every one of them is also in "conflict with other equally worthy values" (ibid., 53). The so-called "American Dream" is an American god, writes Niebuhr; "yet he is god and not just America, because the freedom of opportunity which America offered the class-ridden peoples of Europe, when America was at her best, was a human and not just an American value." The European god of feudalism was a Christian god, a god of battles, and a god of a unique agrarianism. "In Spain," Niebuhr notes, "they are still doing battle for him; and they call their war a war for 'Christian civilization.'" Suffice to say, the god of a culture, the god of a civilization, is always the god of the ark; it is emblazoned on shields, armor, banners, and the undercarriages of bombers, wherever a particular culture or way of life faces off with one that is at variance with it. Human beings who develop a culture, i.e. a life that involves more than mere existence, never fight well if "they are not certain that more than existence is involved in the struggle" (ibid., 54). The conclusion then, is that the god of the ark is the source of what Burke calls "motives," and what in modern times, Niebuhr notes, we call "morale."

If religion were no more than this type of morale-boosting culture religion, and Niebuhr argues that is frequently is, in spite of living in a "Christian age," then it would be fair to admit that the world was essentially polytheistic. The gods of a culture make warfare terrible because they endow each contestant with a certainty that they are fighting for something greater than themselves; a certainty that leads to righteous fury and cruelty (ibid.). Though certainty exists in the men of battle, there is nevertheless an ambiguous

nature in the culture god, the very ambiguity of which creates the fury that point beyond itself. The symbol of this phenomenon is the fact that each culture god is usually attributed with giving birth to life; the culture god is the creator of the entire world, and therefore not bound to a nation. This, Niebuhr notes, was the “achievement and glory of the Hebrew Prophets.”

King David accepted the prophetic interpretation of God’s universalism. Niebuhr notes that when David, a man of war, stopped waging battles and settled into a peaceful leadership role, he decided to replace the mobile tenement that housed Yahweh’s presence in times of war, with a permanent and lasting structure. And here, at this very moment, God’s character seems to change. The God who gave David battle in victory “stayed David’s hand,” declaring him unworthy to build such a sacred monument because he was “too deeply involved in the conflict of life with life” (ibid., 55). Niebuhr calls attention to his favorite prophet, noting that David’s God was the same one that Amos spoke of, who says, “Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians to me?” This is the God of whom Jesus spoke when he said, “Why callest thou me good? None is good, save one, that is God;” the God “who bringeth the princes to naught and maketh the judges of the world as vanity”; the God to whom the nations are as “drop in the bucket;” not the ally of nations, but their judge and their redeemer (ibid., 56).

This presents David with a problem, various solutions to which present themselves. David’s problem is how can a man involved in the conflicts of life build a temple to a God who transcends them? The first solution, Niebuhr notes, contains a certain “pathos and beauty:” David said, I am not good enough, but let my son “who is young and tender” build the temple; let it be built by “the purity of youth,” not yet involved in man’s sins. This,

Niebuhr notes, "is a moral solution;" "it seeks to find some one good enough to build the temple of God" (ibid.). In modern terms, it is a sectarian solution, for the sectarian church protests against the orthodox church that it is not worthy to belong to it. The sect wants to build a new church with regenerated members, members who are pure and holy. The symbol of the error in this solution, Niebuhr points out, is a perfect one. Solomon is indeed allowed to build the temple, but he isn't really better than David; though "young and tender," as David describes him, he is not so tender when he no longer so young. Rebels would soon protest to Rehoboam, Solomon's son, "Your father's yoke was grievous!" Solomon heavily taxed Israel, in order to proudly impress the Queen of Sheba, and Niebuhr adds, as if an Old Testament prophet himself, the unsubstantiated condemnation, "One has the uneasy feeling that the very building of the temple may have added to the tax burden" (ibid., 57). Niebuhr's prophetic pronouncement on the long dead Solomon is not without purpose, for it is this pronouncement that leads Niebuhr to declare that the extravagant building programs of our own civilization are having the same effects; grand opera houses in metropolitan centers, which support fine art and high culture, are the proud gifts of plutocrats who sit in the "diamond horseshoe." These "toys and playthings," even the less entertaining ones, such as universities, have "a disquieting relation to economic injustice, as their endowments are gathered from the crumbs fallen from the rich's tables (ibid., 58). It remains a task, even today, for civilizations to solve the problem of the too intimate relationship between culture and social injustice.

The lesson of Solomon's injustice, Niebuhr notes, is of special importance for America, a country who, like Solomon, achieved its acclaim and power with little effort, making it easy to forget the imperial impulse that came before it's majesty. David's sword

provided Solomon's peace just as America's conquest of Oregon, California and Texas preceded its rise to global power. More importantly, David's regime expressed its conflicts openly, while Solomon's had to express it covertly, just as America's imperial impulse and national egotism is now veiled in rhetorical rationalizations. When America conquered the West it stated that it was in their best interest to do so and that was that. When America conquers Iraq, it does it, not because it is in America's best interest, but because America loves democracy. The conclusion is simply this: Solomon's reign, though less overt about its savageness, was no less savage, and there is no way to extricate ourselves from the warfare of human existence and the conflicts of political power.

Niebuhr argues that the real builder of the temple wasn't Solomon's goodness, but David's uneasy conscience (ibid., 60). The church, he argues, isn't created by the righteousness of the Pharisee but by the "contrition of the publican." In other words, the temple wasn't the achievement of pure goodness but the "recognition of the sinfulness of all human goodness." That this contrition is the fruit of faith in a transcendent Goodness, is expressed in David's prayer: "Thine is the majesty and the power and the victory; we are but sojourners and strangers—we are as a shadow that declineth" (ibid.). Here, Niebuhr argues, is the confession of one's creatureliness before God, a confession of the "vanity of all human victories" that must be a part of every temple that isn't merely the "sanctification of human ideals." The temple or church is a congregation of people who, ideally, feel God speak to them and who answer with the words of Job: "I have uttered things too wonderful for me, which I understood not. Wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes" (ibid., 61). This contrition is the human foundation of the church.

The completion of the church requires more than human contrition, however; it demands completion, which comes from God's grace. Niebuhr points out, once again, the words God spoke to David: "Since it was in thine heart [to build the temple] thou dost well that it was in thine heart" (ibid.). Man, Niebuhr notes, is limited in time and place and thus, all of his ideals are tainted with his limited interests; "He follows the ark of his own ideals." Yet this is not the end of the story; if it were, man would be a pitiful and tragic creature alone. God takes him beyond tragedy because God speaks to him, allowing him to see "the possibility of a truth which is more than his truth and of a goodness which is more than his goodness." Niebuhr writes: "He contemplates the eternal but he cannot name it. When he names it he gives it a name which introduces, again, his own finite perspectives. He cannot even worship the Christ without drawing images of him which make it appear that Christ is his own peculiar possession" (ibid.). Regarding the latter, we could add to Niebuhr's sentiment the images of America's Christ always portray him as a white Anglo-Saxon, not the middle-eastern who fits the racial profile of Islamic terrorists. Niebuhr notes that Ignatius Loyola was a warrior and a monk and his Christ was a warrior and a monk as well. Francis of Assisi was a pure ascetic and his Christ was a pure monk. Gregory VII was a Caesar and a pope, and his Christ was half Caesar and half pope. Yet each one of them was also disturbed at times by their eternal vision that the true Christ was more than just their own. In this sense then, the church is a place where men are "disturbed by the word of the eternal God, which stands as a judgment upon human aspirations" (ibid., 62). But it is more than that; for it is also a place "where the word of mercy, reconciliation and consolation is heard." It is not the Kingdom of God; it is the place in a society where the Kingdom of God

impinges on all human achievements with divine judgments and where the grace of God is made available to everyone who accepts those judgments.

The last significant fact regarding the building of the temple, according to Niebuhr, is that the ark was placed inside of it. The ark, the symbol of the God of battles, rests inside of a temple built to the God of peace who condemned David's involvement in war. The God of the temple transcends the God of battles and encapsulates him, yet he does not destroy or negate his authority altogether. This is where David's culture religion and prophetic religion part, for the prophet's were more rigorous than the priests. The prophets, Niebuhr notes, spoke an eternal "no" to all human pretensions. The prophets would not place the ark in the temple. The priests on the other hand, appreciated what pointed to the eternal in human values; they were the poets who comprehended "the meaning of human activities in the light of the eternal purpose" (ibid., 63). From the prophet's perspective, human pretensions point toward sin; while from the priest's perspective, they point toward approximations of the will of God. The prophet says, "whoso loveth the father and mother" more than God "is not worthy" of God; the priest on the other hand, gives family life a sacramental character, noting the love between family members as a sign and token of God's perfect love. Regarding national and cultural loyalties, Niebuhr notes that the priest never condemns a man's love for his country. In spite of the fact that man's love for his country may lead to a usurpation of God by nationalism, making the nation the center and source of ultimate meaning, the priest sees loyalty and devotion to a cause greater than oneself as a sign that it may be possible for man do give the same loyalty to a God who is greater than man.

There is no way of achieving a perfect balance between the priestly and prophetic voices, between the faith that incorporates the ark into the temple and the one that regards the ark as the devil. Human actions are characteristically ambiguous, making such a balance impossible. But on the whole, Niebuhr points out that priestly religion is much more dangerous than prophetic religion, for the reason that once the ark is in the temple, the aura and majesty of the temple expand and enhance the proportions of the ark. This, Niebuhr concludes, is usually how the Christian church functions. It is a temple with an ark. One needs to look no further than the national flags that hang in its sanctuaries, for evidence of it, though it is always there in reality, even if the symbols aren't. "Many a church is more devoted to the characteristic ideals of its national life," argues Niebuhr, 'than to the Kingdom of God in the light of which these ideals are seen in their pettiness and sinfulness' (ibid., 64-5). For this reason, Niebuhr concludes, "the word of the prophet must always be heard." The prophet, according to Niebuhr, is "an iconoclast who throws all symbols of human goodness out of the temple. Only the word of the eternal God must be heard in the temple, a word of judgment upon human sin and of mercy for sinners."

However, the prophet's words are characteristically "unambiguous" and this may do injustice to the fact that all human enterprise, if it is nothing else, is ambiguous. This ambiguity, Niebuhr notes, may be the source of dishonesty and pretension, but it is also the source of all genuine creativity in human history. The god of the ark is never *purely* the devil, just as human goodness is never *purely* pretension and egoism (ibid., 65). Man's reaching beyond himself for that which he cannot obtain—for perfection, ideals, utopias—is the root of all sin *and* the proof of his destiny as a child of God. Niebuhr summarizes: "His imagination is quickened by the vision of an eternal good. Following that vision, he is

constantly involved both in the sin of giving a spurious sanctity to his imperfect good and in the genuine creativity of seeking a higher good than he possesses” (ibid.). The conclusion is this: no matter what the prophets say, there will always be King Davids; “nor could history exist without them,” for they are “actually the authors of all human enterprise” (ibid.) Many a King David lacks King David’s uneasy conscience, Niebuhr notes, and their religion never transcends their devotion to the ark. “But even those who hear the word of the Eternal and in moments of high insight confess ‘we are but sojourners and strangers—we are as a shadow that declineth’ cannot for that reason cease from performing the tasks of today and tomorrow” (ibid., 65-66). It is significant, Niebuhr concludes, that in spite of America’s simple religion of the ark, it has had one statesman who understood exactly what David was going through.

Lincoln, according to Niebuhr’s estimation, was devoted to the cause of the abolition of slavery and to the Union, though the latter was his ultimate priority. When Lincoln spoke about these two divergent ideals, he said, “Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes his aid against the other. The prayers of both could not be answered” (ibid.). In this passage, Niebuhr finds the articulation of God’s will as a transcendent one; one that surpasses the ideals of both the North and the South. Niebuhr, who had a pension for quoting secular poetry in his sermons, borrows the lyrics of Stephen Vincent Benet to lean on:

They come to me and talk about God’s will
In righteous deputations and platoons,
Day after day, laymen and ministers.
They write me Prayers From Twenty Million Souls
Defining me God’s will and Horace Greeley’s.
God’s will is General This and Senator That,
God’s will is those poor coloured fellows’ will,
It is the will of the Chicago churches,

It is this man's and his worst enemy's.
But all of them are sure they know God's will.
I am the only man who does not know it.

And, yet, if it is probable that God
Should, and so very clearly, state his will
To others, on a point of my own duty,
It might be thought He would reveal it to me
Directly, more especially as I
So earnestly desire to know His will.⁵³

Such an uneasy conscience can be paralyzing, but Niebuhr is quick to note that this was not the effect it had on Lincoln. Lincoln wasn't deterred from making "moral judgments according to his best insight."

Lincoln continues in his Second Inaugural: "It may seem strange that men should ask the assistance of a just God in wringing their bread from other men's toil." Niebuhr calls this statement "a purely moral judgment and a necessary one" (*BT*, 67). Here, we find Niebuhr's insistence that we not let the complexity and ambiguity of all human values, nor the subjectivity of our own interests, nor the humility and love of a Christian attitude, get in the way of our ability to make moral and political judgments about what is right and what is wrong. "No nation is free of the sin of pride," Niebuhr writes, just as no individual is free of it" (*NDMI*, 219). But it is important to distinguish between those nations, like Nazi Germany, that censored the prophetic voice of national self-transcendence, and those, like the U.S., that do not. What makes a nation a "Christian nation," according to Niebuhr, is not that it embodies the principles of Christianity perfectly, but that it is "still receptive to prophetic words of judgment spoken against the nation" (*ibid.*). It may be that only a "prophetic minority" really feels the judgment spoken against the nation keenly, but "there is a genuine difference between nations which do not officially destroy the religious-

⁵³ (Benét 1928)

prophetic judgment against the nation and those which do." Every nation may be guilty of pride and egotism but we must be able to recognize differences in *degree*. It is just as important, Niebuhr argues, "to recognize differences in the degree of pride and self-will expressed by men and nations, as it is to know that all men and nations are sinful in the sight of God."

Lincoln's pronouncement of a moral and necessary judgment represents a devotion to the highest moral ideal we know, which in this case was the ideal of freedom for all men. However, this statement alone wouldn't set Lincoln apart from his predecessors nor his successors. A Niebuhrian rhetoric is not a rhetoric that says, "I'm conflicted about which tragic choice to make; that said, I think the South is acting immorally." Niebuhrian rhetoric goes one step further and returns immediately to another level, as Lincoln does: "But let us judge not that we be not judged" (*BT*, 67). Niebuhr sums up his evaluation of Lincoln's rhetoric:

One could scarcely find a better example of a consummate interweaving of moral idealism and a religious recognition of the imperfection of all human ideals. It is out of such a moral and religious life that the moving generosity is born which Lincoln expressed in the words, "With malice toward none, with charity toward all, let us strive to finish the work we are in." This is a religion in which the ark has not been removed from the temple, but in which the temple is more than the ark. (*ibid.*)

Niebuhr concludes that, though the church rarely balances the ark and the temple as well as this, the examples of David and Lincoln reveal, much like God's incarnation in Christ revealed the possibilities for perfect love on this earth, the possibilities of a noble rhetoric that is in this world, but not *of* it. A rhetoric that pays attention to appearances and makes moral judgments that are contingent and thus, necessarily tragic; yet a rhetoric that looks beyond appearances, to the things they point to.

This is the noble rhetoric that Aristotle dreamed of, according to Farrell. It is a rhetoric “that is more than the product, more even than the practice; it is the entire process of forming, expressing, and judging public thought in real life” (1993, 320). Rhetoric such as Lincoln’s comes from distinctively Christian attitudes—those transvalued values that Nietzsche argued destroy culture: humility, mercy and love. Not only are the Christian socio-moral insights required, but so too, are the prophetic ones: the capacity for judgment and the vision required to imagine a future that is beyond tragedy. Farrell writes:

We may *regret* the past that cannot be changed. We may *suspect* the proposals of those who inhabit our present day. But the very continuity of the human project requires something more. It requires, Hannah Arendt reminds us, the mood and the emotional capacity for forgiveness. It also requires, as Walter Benjamin notes, the rejuvenating capacity to *wish*. Here are his words: “A wish... is a kind of experience. The earlier in life one makes a wish, the greater one’s chances that it will be fulfilled. The further a wish reaches in time, the greater the hopes for its fulfillment. But it is experience that accompanies one to the far reaches of time, that fills and divides time. Thus a wish fulfilled is the crowing of experience. (ibid.)

This is the summation of a rhetoric that maintains the balance between priest and prophetic. It is a rhetoric that Niebuhr articulated himself, and it is one he intuitively formulated in his reflections on pulpit oratory.

It is the Christian rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr., partially inspired from his readings of Niebuhr, and woven into much of his public discourse. Niebuhr’s Christian calling, his understanding of the pastor’s priestly and prophetic tasks, was woven into his last speech, delivered on the final evening of his life:

And you know what’s beautiful to me, is to see all of these ministers of the Gospel. It’s a marvelous picture. Who is it that is supposed to articulate the longings and aspirations of the people more than the preacher? Somehow the preacher must be an Amos, and say, “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” Somehow, the preacher must say with Jesus, “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to deal with the problems of the poor.” (1992)

As King addressed these preachers, he articulates Niebuhr's realism, Niebuhr's concerted attention to appearances that demand, not only mythic symbols but moral judgments about pressing matters:

It's all right to talk about "long white robes over yonder," in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It's all right to talk about "streets flowing with milk and honey," but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do. (ibid.)

Though King often articulated the prophetic quality of rhetorical aspiration, it is most prevalently a Niebuhrian brand of aspiration in his speech titled "Where Do We Go From Here." King's final remarks are an aesthetic reconfiguration of appearances—realistic in their analysis of actuality and thus, tragic; yet poetic and mythic in their reconfiguration and thus, beyond tragedy; Christian in their concern for the only ideals that matter: justice and love. King speaks realistically: "I must confess, my friends, the road ahead will not always be smooth. There will be still be rocky places of frustration and meandering points of bewilderment... Our dreams will sometimes be shattered and our ethereal hopes blasted." King offers a doxology of hope from the words of a freedom fighter's song, moving beyond tragedy, for as "Difficult and painful as it is, we must walk on in the days ahead with an audacious faith in the future." But why? What reason would King's audience have for thinking the future will be different than the past? King answers:

When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice. Let us realize that William Cullen Bryant is right: "Truth crushed to earth will rise again." Let us go out realizing that the Bible is right: "Be not deceived, God is not mocked. Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." This is for

hope for the future, and with this faith we will be able to sing in some not too distant tomorrow with a cosmic past tense, “We have overcome, we have overcome, deep in my heart, I did believe we would overcome.” (ibid.)

This, then, is the uniquely Christian aspect of Niebuhr’s ethics of rhetoric: a Christian ethics of rhetoric moves us from the realm of rhetoric, itself a realm of tragic choices between competing goods, beyond tragedy, in the hope and faith that the arc of the moral universe swings toward justice. Only rhetoric is able to articulate this faith, for it is always a culture’s faith and thus, it depends on a group of like-minded individuals. The church, a brotherhood of civic friendship, is the rhetorical culture Aristotle envisioned and it is responsible for some of our noblest rhetorics.

Broadway and 120th Street, now Reinhold Niebuhr Place, was the sight of Niebuhr’s office in New York. Though he met with students personally at this office, the magic happened just down the road in his sixth floor apartment on Claremont Avenue, across the street from the seminary. Every week, fifty students would crowd into Niebuhr’s home for informal discussions, doughnuts and beer. It was mostly “Reinhold’s show” since most of the students just “wanted him to talk” (Brown 1992, 66). These evening gatherings gave rise to a student song, sang to the tune of “When the Roll Is Called up Yonder”—a tune I grew up singing myself:

When it’s eight o’clock on Thursday night
and books become a bore
Then we’ll leave our desks and climb the golden stair
We will gather at the master’s feet
a-sitting on the floor.
When the beer is served at Reinie’s place, we’ll be there. (ibid.)

It’s a scene from a Platonic dialogue; and so it is not without coincidence that they often began that way, for as one student recalls, “Niebuhr often began responding to something said by saying, ‘It isn’t as simple as that.’” With this, Niebuhr passed on the ethics of

rhetoric to his students, embodying what his arch-nemesis, John Dewey, would say of the ideal teacher—Niebuhr’s “pedagogical-technician”: "I believe that every teacher should realize the dignity of his calling; that he is a social servant set apart for the maintenance of proper social order and the securing of the right social growth. I believe that in this way the teacher always is the prophet of the true God and the ushered of the true kingdom of God" (Dewey, Hickman, and Alexander 1998).

We’ve seen that a rhetorical culture’s ethics are articulated, adjusted, and amended in its civic discourse. Niebuhr understood this fact. He paid attention, not just to what was said, but to *how* things were said, i.e. were they qualified repeatedly, spoken in humility and toleration. What we’ve drawn from Niebuhr’s works in this study, brings new life to a timeless Niebuhrian aphorism:

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness. (*IAM*, 66)

Our evaluation of his Christian ethics of rhetoric, also shed light on the many summations of Niebuhr’s life. The eulogies given for Niebuhr are so beautiful and poetic, delivered by such notorious public intellectuals and statesman like Hubert Humphrey and Abraham Heschel, that the analysis of Niebuhr’s thought that can evade closing with them is a rare feat. It is my opinion that Niebuhr himself would not have approved any of the more famous eulogies, but would have only signed off on Roger Shinn’s, which began with a biblical passage from Ezekiel: “And whether they hear or refuse to hear... they will know that there has been a prophet among them” (3:5). Shinn continued: “As we celebrate the

life and mourn the death of Reinhold Niebuhr, the ancient words ring in our ears. We know that there has been a prophet among us. Not that he claimed the gift of prophecy. He, who knew so well the fallibility of men, brushed off flattery. His style was to risk many a judgment for which we would never claim the rubric, 'Thus saith the Lord.' Often he stated his new insights by criticizing his past errors. Niebuhr united flashing polemic and profound piety, scintillating wit and awed reverence, spectacular intellect and deep feeling... He put theology in the middle of the cultural and political world, as it had not been for generations. He taught the meaning of sin and forgiveness for massive institutional behavior as well as for personal life." What more was Shinn noting of Niebuhr, than that he embodied both prophet and priest? Both Justice and Love?

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