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Where Lies the Wisdom to Distinguish One from the Other: The Question of Moral Creativity at 2000

Donna M. Chirico

The creators of the blockbuster film, *Titanic*, seem to downplay the extraordinary acts of real heroism that took place as the ship sank. The fact that the order, "women and children first," was obeyed with few aberrations is glossed over, but the reasoning for this portrayal is understandable. The sense of personal duty that prevailed at the *fin de siècle* of the 19th century and into the Edwardian Age seems unbelievable to an audience at the end of the 20th century. Smarmy greed and self-aggrandizement are so indicative of the rich today that selfless acts of compassion become tabloid headlines: Self-interest is not confined to the wealthy or famous; it is widespread in our culture. The litter-glitter-shiterati merely give it an imprimatur so that the rest of us can point to public role models when we choose self over community well-being.

The correlative to self-centeredness is the inability to go outside the circle of immediacy. Social activism appears in pockets of society or as a blip in the course of events. Earth Day remains just that for most, while the Million Man March and similar events are quickly relegated to history. Declines in voter turnout, gifts to charity, union memberships, and even blood donations all serve as evidence of the failure of community. There is reluctance, and frequently outright refusal, to participate in a sustained fashion. The associations people do join are either limited in scope and geographically dispersed or they are so large that anonymity is guaranteed. The increasing reliance on the Internet, with its disembodied organizations and chat rooms, takes the chance to participate in isolation to a new level.

While apathy and indifference are often cited as the roots of inaction, for many individuals a more complex cognitive matrix exists. The ability to take action in the name of a cause requires that a person move beyond thinking about issues and do something to support intellectualization. Conflicting demands of the social structure often limit action because going against the institutional hierarchy minimizes external psychic rewards.

This essay will explore how the social system suppresses moral creativity by altering the way a person conceives his relationship to the system. Psychological development of the self is modified as the values that maintain the social structure are incorporated into the cognitive structure of the individual. Using Reinhold Niebuhr as a case study, one sees how access to extrinsic rewards can influence moral thinking and modify behavior so that the goals of the hierarchy become the goals of the individual. Niebuhr was invited to join his adversaries, during and after the Roosevelt administration, so that over time he began to temper his earlier radical positions toward issues of social justice. It can be argued from a psychological perspective that this illustrates an inability to overcome social convention. Despite Niebuhr's talent for articulating taking an active approach to Christian realism, he was, ultimately, unable to develop a self apart from the social structure.

The choice of Niebuhr rests on two factors. One is Niebuhr's emergence as a publicly recognized moral spokesperson. This occurred because of his personal drive to espouse his views in public and the circumstances surrounding the intellectual competition. Considered the more influential theologian, Paul Tillich, by choice, was less evident in the public sphere, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hung by the Gestapo in 1945. The second factor is the impact Niebuhr has had on the attitudes of Protestant ministers and the actions sanctioned through Protestant teaching for the remainder of this century. Protestantism, in general, can be charged with the same failures of moral creativity that will be discussed regarding Niebuhr.

Introduction to the Case Study

On November 14, 1940, eight young men were arrested at the Union Theological Seminary. Their crime was "a refusal to acknowledge the conscripting power of the state" (Tracy, 1996). That same day Niebuhr gave a sermon denouncing their criminal deeds. He knew these students well and, while he understood their behavior, condoning it was out of the question. A few days later, Niebuhr wrote to a colleague, "I cannot honestly support them in essentially anarchistic philosophies of government" (Tracy, 1996).

Although there are hints of this position before 1940, people familiar with Niebuhr's ideology were surprised by his firm opposition to these students. Both before and after the arrests, Niebuhr participated in numerous

associations and movements that triumphed the pacifist cause. In the pre-World War II era, however, Niebuhr became increasingly disturbed by what he saw as irrational pacifist idealism in the face of the Nazi threat. His public critiques of using military force were tempered by his private suspicions that force, including use of the atom bomb, was necessary to stop hostilities in Europe and the Pacific. There is a *volte-face* in Niebuhr's attitude toward pacifism that eventually turns him into an ardent critic of the movement.

Consequently, the Union Eight episode becomes a turning point in Niebuhr's *weltanschauung* and marks the culmination of his shift to Neo-orthodoxy. The Neo-orthodoxy movement made its dramatic appearance in 1919 with the publication of Karl Barth's *Commentary on the Romans*. This ideology contends that sin and evil are not the result of error or ignorance, as liberal theologians had argued, but rather are ingrained in the human condition. Niebuhr referred to his interpretation of this stance as Christian Realism. Although he never constructed a complete theological system, it is this issue of applying the praxis of Christianity to the reality of existing political and social environments that penetrates Niebuhr's writing and informs his preaching. In rejecting the notions of progress and utopianism, he accepts the reality of sin and argues that the person must, nonetheless, remain socially involved. The means to this participation is the authentic manifestation of love. It is "the obligation of the Christian [to] determine the concrete applications of love within particular historical situations" (Queen, 1996).

Social Context and Contextual Historicism

In 1932, John C. Bennett wrote, "Reinhold Niebuhr is the most significant influence in contemporary American religious thought." This sentiment regarding his notoriety was echoed, in one form or another, throughout Niebuhr's lifetime. As World War II approached, the sphere of influence broadened from the United States to the world community. It should therefore come as no surprise then that it is virtually impossible to discuss Niebuhr's creative process without interweaving the effect that his social context had on this process.

The fateful circumstances of his birth in 1892 placed Niebuhr in the path of several tumultuous events of this century. His years at Yale Divinity School coincide with World War I. Niebuhr took up his position as profes-

sor of applied Christianity at Union Theological Seminary in 1928, so his immersion in big city life begins on the brink of the Great Depression. Niebuhr's masterwork, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, is the result of the Gifford Lectures presented at the University of Edinburgh in 1939 in the midst of growing turmoil in Europe.

Niebuhr wrote extensively about the broader implications of history and the conflict of the individual within time and place. He believed that there is an "obligation to fulfill the possibilities of life [in light of] the limitations and corruptions in all historic realizations." As Niebuhr states, "Only gradually it is realized that man's effort to deny and escape his finiteness in imperial ambitions and power add an element of corruption to the fabric of history and a perennial problem from the standpoint of the fulfillment of human history and destiny" (1953, Volume II). Langdon Gilkey has summarized Niebuhr on this responsibility by stating that, "Human beings in history are incurably creative, and so history is dynamic, moving, creative, and even progressive" (Rasmussen, 1991).

The creativity is borne out of freedom, but it does not come unfettered. Niebuhr asserts, "Where there is history at all, there is freedom, where there is freedom, there is sin" (1953, Volume II). The sin manifests itself chiefly as pride. This is the failure of individuals, classes, and nations to acknowledge there are other approaches, other truths, that are valid within history. On this point, McAfee Brown adds that, "one clear sign of the presence of virtue is an unwillingness to claim it too absolutely as one's own" (1986, xxi).

Niebuhr was not unaffected by this dilemma nor was he unaware of the force that the historical milieu had upon his work and thinking. In 1953, when *The Nature and Destiny of Man* was reissued, a new preface was added in which Niebuhr states, "A tragic decade in human history has intervened...Not a few achievements and frustrations of this decade might yield valuable insights upon the issues discussed in this volume" (ix). Despite this acknowledgment, no revisions were made in the text because Niebuhr believed that the volumes should stand as a record of their time and place. He resists this "temptation" and accedes that any corrections of an "obviously faulty judgment or [to] make a defense of a challenged position" would require an entirely new volume (*ibid.*).

Creativity in the Moral Domain

In understanding creativity in the moral domain, one should not assume that individuals who devote their lives to the religious or spiritual arena are inexorably preoccupied with moral thinking and activity. There are numerous distinctions in the literature made between the content and systems of religion versus the attitudes and behaviors that individuals manifest (see Palutzian, 1996; Hood, et al., 1996). One need only evaluate the role of clergy throughout history to discern the palpable absence of moral responsibility. It is therefore noteworthy when an individual who operates in the theological realm combines philosophical contemplation with the resultant behavior that puts such thinking into action. Niebuhr exemplifies this capacity.

The belief that there must be moral integrity permeates his writings on theological ethics, the nature of sin as well as history and destiny. If Christian Realism is the oeuvre, then its embodiment in the quest for moral integrity animates each of Niebuhr's endeavors. His attitude toward moral action can be seen in Niebuhr's family life, preaching and, most clearly, in his political activism. Niebuhr's concern with the association between the theoretical and its application is evident in his formal writing but is best exemplified by a short prayer he wrote.

Niebuhr spent summers in Heath, Massachusetts, and was occasionally asked to preach at a small church there. When asked to speak once on the spur of the moment in 1943, Niebuhr jotted down a few lines on the back of an old envelope, as follows:

God give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed,
courage to change the things that should be changed,
and the wisdom to distinguish one from the other (McAfee Brown, 1986).

These hastily written words embrace the moral struggle that consumed Niebuhr his entire life. The essence of this prayer serves as Niebuhr's legacy and a chief indication of the limits to his creative activity and self-development. It can be seen as the closing of the parentheses that began with the arrest of the Union Eight in that it provides justification for immobility in the name of wisdom.

As an advocate of Christian Realism, Niebuhr presupposed that the Christian life is one that necessarily incorporates action. It is within a con-

text of historically based behavior that faith and belief are appropriately sustained. Initially for Niebuhr, this idea translated into a political activism and progressive liberalism that attempted to put into practice the fundamental characteristics of Christian ethics. As time goes on though, one can see in Niebuhr's own moral and spiritual development a subjugation of his personal faith to the accommodation of the political power structures that prevailed in the 1940s and 1950s. Douglas Sloan highlights this point by asserting that, "even the values and goals of ethical action themselves seemed to be supplied less and less by faith and instead to be taken increasingly from the available alternatives of the given political left or right—with faith being reduced to a mere source of energy and willpower for their attainment" (1994, 123).

As Niebuhr became involved increasingly in the political power structure as an insider, his radical views about the role of government shifted toward those of the authority figures he had previously denounced. Niebuhr moved from speaking as an independent thinker, whose ideology was informed by the Christian message, to acting as an advocate for the prevailing opinions of the United States government.

After the publication of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* in the early 1940s, Niebuhr's views about the individual in society began to soften. In part, this was due to the events surrounding the outbreak of World War II. The pacifism espoused by leading intellectuals of the day gave way under the tension of the rise of Fascism, the Spanish Civil War, Nazi aggression and Pearl Harbor. In this light Niebuhr's about-face is understandable, but it is still surprising given his ardent pacifism and early skepticism about the ability of the "open society" to operate equally in the interests of all (Fox, 1985).

In 1944, Niebuhr published *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*. This essay reworks material found in earlier books, but its conclusions are dramatically different. Although previously an advocate for justice at any cost, Niebuhr now argues that although the struggle for justice is necessary it must be curtailed when social equilibrium is threatened. As Niebuhr's sermons and lectures shifted from the theological to the geopolitical, the invitations from government agencies seeking his participation began to mount.

In the post-World War II era, Niebuhr became the "official establish-

ment theologian” (Fox, 1985). Among other honors, he became a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, met regularly with the state department’s Advisory Commission on Cultural Policy in Occupied Territories and was a member of the American delegation to the Fourth Conference of UNESCO.

Despite his intellect and his creative process, Niebuhr was ultimately unable to defy convention and follow through on his radical liberal idealism. In the end, the maintenance of societal structures, however flawed, and self-interest took precedence over the greater good that had earlier captivated his imagination. The “wisdom to distinguish” what can be changed from what cannot be changed becomes influenced by what is politically advantageous to change. This acquiescence does not seem unusual today because it is a common phenomenon, but at the time there was the possibility for genuine social reorganization.

Niebuhr in Psychological Perspective

One hypothesis that helps explain the inability to make this breakthrough is to examine Niebuhr from the standpoint of psychological development of the self. As one analyzes his thinking and behaviors as they connect with the major theories of moral and religious development, it becomes apparent that Niebuhr’s growth in these areas impeded his creativity. Through time the purpose of his theological work was subdued by the demands of the majority and in the process his creative output becomes thwarted by developmental limitations.

Each of the major theories of development—Kohlberg, Fowler, and Oser—presume that in order to truly go beyond conventional thinking, the individual must stand outside his societal element. It is also common to each theory that the stage just previous to the final one combines an advanced sense of moral or religious thinking that is still tied to the social structure. To reach the height of creative achievement of the self in the moral domain, this attachment must be broken. This does not mean that the social structure is ignored. In discussing the necessity for the creative person to reconcile “personal freedom and social responsibility,” Gruber states to the contrary that, “the creative person, to carry out the responsibility to self, the responsibility for inner integrity, must also in some way be responsive to the world” (1988, 281). The world becomes an impediment to the creative

endeavor when the inner vision is put aside or devaluated to maintain the status quo.

In his biting analysis of *The Irony of American History*, Noam Chomsky examines Niebuhr's conventionalist propensity. He tries to explain the "immense" social influence that the "official establishment theologian" had, despite making assertions and drawing conclusions that lacked plausibility. Chomsky contends, "In his avoidance of fact and argument, and the praise that such practice elicited, Niebuhr was enjoying the luxury afforded anyone who remains firmly within conventional orthodoxies, playing the game by the rules. More exacting standards are demanded of those who prefer not to march in parades" (1987, 211).

There are many instances of positions taken by Niebuhr that can be deemed suspect when evaluated in relation to his theological philosophy that support Chomsky's argument. The opprobrium he displayed toward any faction that maintained even the mildest Communist sympathy is one case. In March 1948, Niebuhr supported the counterinsurgency campaign being mounted in Greece. This is because the action to restore the old order was carried out under the guise of defending Greece from Soviet aggression. Greeks who resisted the government were murdered and Nazi collaborators placed into positions of power; yet Niebuhr calls these acts "absolutely necessary" to stave off the communist threat (see Chomsky and Fox).

Niebuhr states, "There are provisional meanings in history, capable of being recognized and fulfilled by individuals and cultures; but mankind will continue to 'see through a glass darkly' and the final meaning can be anticipated only by faith" (1949, 214). He adds, "There are renewals of life in history, individually and collectively; but no rebirth lifts life above the contradictions of man's historic existence" (ibid.). Despite this penetrating view of the individual's limitations within history, Niebuhr was unable to move past them.

His interest in political matters and his participation in the political power structure moved Niebuhr "off course" from his initial theological outlook. Fox states that he became in practice the kind "egotist" who displayed sentimentality rather than morality—a position Niebuhr had once spoken against with fervent passion (1985). Again in his writings, Niebuhr seems to demonstrate an understanding of this predicament. "In actual life, no clear distinction between moral principles and strategy can be made. This is why

Christian convictions that deal only with ultimate principle and exclude strategic issues tend to become wholly irrelevant" (Davis and Good, 1960).

Critics argue that these and similar assertions have a hollow ring in the context of Niebuhr's own political ideologies as seen in the historical context. Charles Frankel, in writing about the rediscovery of sin in the era of neo-orthodoxy, has said that, "The lineaments of Mr. Niebuhr's philosophy of history coincide peculiarly with the lineaments of contemporary experience" (1955, 112). Others argue the problem was one of being driven by social expedience rather than faith. Sloan reminds us, "In 1959 Harvard philosopher Morton White dubbed as 'atheists for Niebuhr' the many intellectuals, both inside and outside academia, who, without counting themselves fellow believers, nonetheless found great stimulation in Niebuhr's theological analyses of human nature, political and culture" (1994, 112). This statement can be viewed in one of two ways. Niebuhr was either able to reach people regardless of their religious persuasion or his own theological foundation was so watered down that it did not pose a threat to non-believers.

Some Final Considerations

In trying to explain the inherent proclivity to sin, Niebuhr notes, "it is man's radical and boundless freedom which is the basis of the self's destructive as well as creative powers; and there is no simple possibility of making nice distinctions between human destructiveness and creativity" (Davis and Good, 1960).

Although no one would accuse Niebuhr of directly committing any destructive acts, there is certainly a limitation present that can be viewed as destructive to his achievements as moral presence and creative leader. Despite his accomplishments, there is an inadequacy discernible in his taking the easier, more conventional, path. So, when Niebuhr speaks about the "wisdom to distinguish one from the other" one must ask whether this is a valid approach to making moral choices—or is it simply a way for the self to avoid making the difficult choice?

At first, Niebuhr's prosaic lines seem poignantly accurate. It is finding the wisdom to see the distinction between circumstances we can change from those we cannot that indicate the real inner struggle. A closer examination of the prayer, coupled with an understanding of Niebuhr's own life

and choices, brings about a different interpretation. In this reading, the final line is an escape. It represents a failure to achieve psychological integration of the self and becomes a way to avoid the exercise of the creative freedom necessary to make exemplary moral decisions.

Being able to make this kind of choice is recognizably a difficult criterion to achieve. It may be that in the realm of moral creativity of the self a higher standard is expected because the product is not transitory and often has a direct, lasting impact on the environment. Niebuhr is not alone in his inadequacy. In a discussion addressing the failures of the American Left, Tracy says that it is, "disjointed, episodic, and obsessed with individualistic lifestyle concerns" (1996, 153). One can easily point to the roots of this in the choices made by ardent proponents of the movement circa the post-World War II era. Niebuhr is just one example.

This is why Niebuhr is important to consider in a discussion of the self as we approach the millennium. He exhibits the failures of moral creativity so indicative of 20th-century America. The powerful ideals of a social system built on democratic principles are difficult to see beyond. Even when you can see past them, as in the case of Niebuhr, taking appropriate action to overcome social injustice engendered by the system is still difficult.

Activists in the political-religious movements of Niebuhr's day who, after all, spawned the social upheaval of the 1960s, have settled back to an armchair liberalism where materialism and personal comfort take precedence over taking the action needed to overhaul the system. In a postmodern world where all is relative anyway, it is easier to accept inequity in the guise of personal or cultural differences than to take a moral stand. The hazards involved in doing this should not be ignored, but without moral creativity there can be no attempt. This involves self sacrifice so that a community of concerned selves can come together and provoke change. It starts with taking a moral stand.

Hans Küng writes, "No one has vision today. No one can say what should happen or what the long-term future should bring. A sense of helplessness pervades cultural life, and there is oppressive void...On all sides [*we lack a realistic vision of the future*] (1998, xiii). The sad truth is that we have lost our realistic vision. There was a moment when our moral leaders were persons who ascribed to a broader, more inclusive ethic, but there was something missing. Niebuhr's failure is our failure.

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