REINHOLD NIEBUHR

THE NATURE AND DESTINY OF MAN

A CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION

VOLUME ONE: HUMAN NATURE

VOLUME TWO: HUMAN DESTINY

INTRODUCTION BY
ROBIN W. LOVIN

CHINA SOCIAL SCIENCES PUBLISHING HOUSE
CHENGCHENG BOOKS LTD.

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

人的本性及其命运:英文/(美)尼布尔著. -影印本.
-北京:中国社会科学出版社,1999.12
(西学基本经典·宗教学类/西学基本经典工作委员会 编)
ISBN 7-5004-2645-3

Ⅰ.人… Ⅱ.尼… Ⅲ.新教-神学-英文 Ⅳ.B972

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(1999)第 68467 号

版权总代理:TAO MEDIA INTERNATIONAL
(2790 19th Avenue, Ste. 20, San Francisco, CA 94132 U.S.A)

西学基本经典·宗教学类
西学基本经典工作委员会 编
中国社会科学出版社 出版发行
(北京鼓楼西大街甲 158 号 邮编 100720)
E-mail:5004@Peoplespace.net
诚成图书有限公司制作
中国建筑工业出版社密云印刷厂印刷
新华书店经销
1999 年 12 月第 1 版 1999 年 12 月第 1 次印刷
开本 880×1230 1/32 印张 178.5
宗教学类全 11 册 定价:550.00 元

总 策 划　严　平　野　夫
项目策划　张自文　任建成

西学基本经典工作委员会

※　※　※　※　※

西学基本经典专家委员会

LIBRARY OF THEOLOGICAL ETHICS

General Editors' Introduction

The field of theological ethics possesses in its literature an abundant inheritance concerning religious convictions and the moral life, critical issues, methods, and moral problems. The Library of Theological Ethics is designed to present a selection of important texts that would otherwise be unavailable for scholarly purposes and classroom use. The series will engage the question of what it means to think theologically and ethically. It is offered in the conviction that sustained dialogue with our predecessors serves the interests of responsible contemporary reflection. Our more immediate aim in offering it, however, is to enable scholars and teachers to make more extensive use of classic texts as they train new generations of theologians, ethicists, and ministers.

The volumes included in the Library will comprise a variety of types. Some will make available English-language texts and translations that have fallen out of print; others will present new translations of texts previously unavailable in English. Still others will offer anthologies or collections of significant statements about problems and themes of special importance. We hope that each volume will encourage contemporary theological ethicists to remain in conversation with the rich and diverse heritage of their discipline.

ROBIN W. LOVIN
DOUGLAS F. OTTATI
WILLIAM SCHWEIKER

INTRODUCTION

> [A] free society prospers best in a cultural, religious, and moral atmosphere which encourages neither a too pessimistic nor a too optimistic view of human nature.[1]
>
> —Reinhold Niebuhr (1959)

The Nature and Destiny of Man offers a sweeping review of philosophy, religion, and politics. Hebrew and Christian scriptures, classical and contemporary philosophy, the Romanticism of nineteenth-century idealism, Marxist materialism, and more are drawn together in an account of "Human Nature" and "Human Destiny." Like all of Reinhold Niebuhr's works, the scope of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* reflects the author's genius, but its power comes from the specificity of its message. The work we have today began as Niebuhr's Gifford Lectures, delivered at the University of Edinburgh in 1939. As another war with Germany began to seem inevitable, Niebuhr's British audience drew strength from his summary of the contributions Western thought had made to human self-understanding, and from his spirited defense of the Christian interpretation of the human condition. It was a time when people needed to see historic choices in large terms, not in order to inhabit the whole range of human possibilities, but so that they might know exactly where they stood in the present.

Reinhold Niebuhr was well prepared to give that orientation, first to the audience in Edinburgh, and then to the wider readership of the published lectures.[2] Born in 1892 in Missouri, he had grown to maturity in Lincoln, Illinois, and studied at Elmhurst College and Yale Divinity School. In 1915, he became pastor of Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit, where he learned firsthand about the racial conflicts and labor unrest that strained America's growing cities in the years after World War I. By the late 1920s, he had a growing reputation as a preacher, writer, and political activist. In 1928, he joined the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York. The publication of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*[3] in 1932 made him a dominant voice in Protestant social ethics.

Niebuhr's work reflected the emerging shape of his discipline in the theological schools of North America. Niebuhr and his colleagues were more engaged with contemporary social problems than their European counterparts, and they were as much committed to the emerging methods of the social sciences as to the traditions of moral theology.

Yet Reinhold Niebuhr also maintained strong ties with European theologians, and he traveled extensively in Germany during the 1920s. Better than most North Americans, Niebuhr understood that the communist revolutions and nationalistic dictatorships that had changed the political landscape of Europe were not simply the results of events since 1914. Communism and fascism were both deeply rooted in the hopes and dreams of European Romantics early in the nineteenth century, and each movement in its way illustrated the tragic failure of human beings to grasp the complexity of their own situation. Niebuhr began to think that those who might in the future have to contend against Marxism and fascism in a decisive conflict would do well to attend to the complexities of social and historical reality, rather than relying on an overly simple vilification of their enemies and an exaggerated confidence in their own virtue.

CHRISTIAN REALISM

Attentiveness to the powers and interests that shape events was central to the "realism" that Niebuhr and other social ethicists proposed in the years of economic dislocation and political disillusionment that followed World War I. The call for "religious realism" or a "realistic theology" originated with a small group that had ties to Yale Divinity School and included Reinhold Niebuhr, his brother H. Richard Niebuhr, their teacher at Yale, D. C. Macintosh, Walter Marshall Horton, and others. To these younger theologians, the Social Gospel movement, which had sometimes believed too easily that moral exhortation would lead people to work for justice, now seemed hopelessly sentimental. *Moral Man and Immoral Society* examined the cherished beliefs of middle-class morality and exposed the self-interest behind it moral commitments to law and to the protection of property rights. But he took an equally skeptical view of the revolutionary ethics of the poor and powerless. "The conflict between proletarian and middle-class morality is thus a contest between hypocrisy and brutality, and between sentimentality and cynicism."[4]

Realism as Niebuhr understood it, however, included more than this frank acknowledgment of the pervasive rule of self-interest, although that was the most obvious and most controversial part of his analysis in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. A realist would never expect moral commands to love one's neighbor to overcome the forces of self-interest and power all by themselves, but a realist like Reinhold Niebuhr would never forget that moral ideas and faith commitments are also real and exert their own pressures on the course of events.

Niebuhr came to use the name "Christian Realism" for this attentiveness *all* of the realities at work in social change and conflict. The Christian Realist begins, as *Moral Man and Immoral Society* suggests, with *political realism*, identifying the forms of economic and political power at work in history: The majority use the power of numbers to press their claims for a more egalitarian justice

against those whose privileged positions rest on the power of wealth. The wealthy respond with their own claims to a just reward for the resources they make available to the whole society. In this, they always claim more reward than strict justice requires, but their adversaries concede them less than they deserve. A realist expects no final resolution to these conflicts, but a stable society must establish a work equilibrium between the claims of liberty and equality, freedom and order, or need and merit.

Niebuhr developed a great knowledge of politics, and he could trace these themes through Western history with considerable erudition.[5] Political insight alone, however, does not explain the widespread interest in his work or the esteem in which he was held by scholars and political leaders whose knowledge and experience clearly exceeded his own. Niebuhr's great achievement was what we might call a ***moral realism***, which connects the shifting forces in political conflict to deeper, more lasting currents in human nature. Many other commentators could draw connections between individual motivation and actions, or account for events in terms of the character of a nation and its people. The crisis in Europe, for example, could be explained by Adolf Hitler's limitless ambition, or by the inflexiblity of German national pride. Niebuhr gave such interpretations a more nuanced and universal form, so that motives and actions were never pure manifestations of good or evil, and every fault of the evil or the enemy could be related to some more basic form of pride or will to power that all people share.

Mapping the complex moral realities that shape our politics and our history is the primary task of the first part of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, ten chapters on human nature that formulate the tensions and balances necessary to a full description of human life. Human beings require both vitality and form. Life asserts itself against all imposed limits, yet quickly dies when deprived of structure. Human beings are characterized by both freedom and finitude. They have an imaginative grasp of possibilities that can never be confined to the given conditions of their lives, and yet their creativity always reflects the place where they begin, and their capacity for change is profoundly limited. "Man knows more than the immediate natural situation in which he stands, and he constantly seeks to understand his immediate situation in terms of a total situation. Yet he is unable to define the total human situation without colouring his definition with finite perspectives drawn from his immediate situation."[6]

The motives that shape the action of leaders and peoples alike are drawn from the complexity of this human situation, and the tragedies of history arise when we oversimplify our situation to conceal these ambiguities from others or to convince ourselves that we have somehow escaped them. "[M]an is tempted to deny the limited character of his knowledge, and the finiteness of his perspectives. He pretends to have achieved a degree of knowledge which is beyond the limit of finite life. This is the 'ideological taint' in which all human knowledge is involved, and which is always something more than mere human ignorance. It is always partly an effort to hide that ignorance by pretension."[7]

Niebuhr's moral realism thus provides the starting point for the analysis of ideas and movements in his political realism. But the moral realism, in turn, rests on a *theological realism.* That is, we can truly understand the characteristic possibilities and limits that must guide our lives and the life of society only if we also know the limits of that understanding. Awareness of human nature must grow in ways that point us to a source of understanding that lies beyond ourselves:

> This ability to stand outside and beyond the world, tempts man to megalomania and persuades him to regard himself as the god around and about whom the universe centres. Yet he is too obviously involved in the flux and finiteness of nature to make such pretensions plausibly. The real situation is that he has an environment of eternity which he cannot know through the mere logical ordering of his experience. . . . The only principle for the comprehension of the whole (the whole which includes both himself and his world) is therefore inevitably beyond his comprehension. Man is thus in the position of being unable to comprehend himself in his full stature of freedom without a principle of comprehension which is beyond his comprehension.[8]

Many things will answer to this need for a "principle of comprehension beyond our comprehension." The identification of this principle with biblical faith is established by a rather specific sort of extended argument. (Just what sort of argument it is we will consider more fully in the next section of this Introduction.) The important thing to note for the present is that for Niebuhr, political and moral insight are bound up inseparably with the reality of God, who both calls us to freedom and sets limits on it. The political scientists of Niebuhr's day who jocularly proclaimed themselves "Atheists for Niebuhr"[9] because they admired his political analysis and were baffled by his theology perhaps did not understand how closely the politics and the theology were connected in his own thinking. A large part of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* is devoted to tracing those connections and making them explicit. In this work, perhaps more than in any other Niebuhr wrote, it become clear that "Christian Realism" is more than a set of opinions on the issues of the day. It is a synthesis of political, moral, and theological reflection, in which the undeniability of human freedom and the inescapability of its limits are the twin realities that together form a framework for understanding both the multiplicity of our specific choices and the ultimate unity of the environment in which they all take place.

"A CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION"

Niebuhr gives *The Nature and Destiny of Man* the subtitle "A Christian Interpretation," and he begins the work with a statement that shows how difficult any comprehensive interpretation of our human nature must be: "Man has always been his own most vexing problem. How shall he think of himself? 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 that seems to deny what the proposition intended to affirm."[10]

Much is suggested in this opening passage about the twenty chapters that follow. The problem of the study is not framed in theological terms: "Is there a God?" "What is the nature of God?" The problem is human self-understanding, but concealed within that problem, Niebuhr suggests, are all the other problems we create for ourselves—violence and domination, creativity and tragedy, morality, self-centeredness, cynicism, foolishness, and hope. What we do as individuals and as a society is an expression of the self as we understand it, or, more often, the product of a characteristic *mis*-understanding that distorts the self that is seeking to understand itself.

The Nature and Destiny of Man explores the Christian Realist's way of dealing with these issues, but it also makes a case for this understanding of the Christian faith. We not only learn the Christian Realist's answer to this "most vexing problem." We get reasons for accepting that this is the right answer.

It is important to understand how Niebuhr makes that case in order to understand the structure he has given to the book, which moves from the first part, "Human Nature," to a second part, also composed of ten chapters, titled "Human Destiny." The progression is from a detailed account of human life that contrasts the Christian interpretation with the alternatives offered by ancient and modern cultures (Part I) to an interpretation of Christian eschatology that points to the limits of even our most successful attempts to understand history as a whole (Part II). In the process, we see how Niebuhr makes the case for Christian Realism.

Although the endowment of the Gifford Lectures originated in a provision in Lord Gifford's will that they should deal with the problems of natural theology, Niebuhr does not make an argument that attempts to prove points about the existence, nature, and purposes of God by means of logical argument. The Christian account of our experience of freedom and finitude is not dictated by logic alone. Niebuhr's conclusions rarely follow from his evidence with the force of logical necessity, as his critics among the philosophers were quick to point out.

Niebuhr's link between Christian faith and ordinary experience is rather, as his subtitle alerts us, an interpretation. He resolves the problem of freedom and finitude by interpreting it through the Christian idea of sin. The anxiety that we all feel upon recognizing our own finitude provokes us to deny that finitude and magnify our freedom. That attempt to become the source of our own security epitomizes what Christians have called "sin," turning away from the true God to other gods of our own making. The only resolution to this tension in which one element of our nature—our freedom—is at war with another—our finitude—is a complete trust in God which alleviates all anxiety and thus relieves us of the need to make ourselves the object of our trust.[11]

This is not the only interpretation of the problem of finitude and freedom,

nor is it the simplest. A Romantic idealist or a cynical materialist would offer other interpretations, quite different from the one that Niebuhr proposes. When he concedes that the Christian interpretation cannot be established with logical necessity, he does not mean for us to think that all interpretations are equal, or that the choice between them is arbitrary. Conclusive proof is not available, but we are not left simply to choose blindly between the competing interpretations of our human situation. Writing some years after *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr explained the sense in which we can establish an argument for the Christian understanding:

> Nevertheless, a limited rational validation of the truth of the Gospel is possible. It consists of a negative and a positive approach to the relation of the truth of the Gospel to other forms of truth, and of the goodness of perfect love to historic forms of virtue. Negatively, the Gospel must and can be validated by exploring the limits of historic forms of wisdom and virtue. Positively, it is validated when the truth of faith is correlated with all truths which may be known by scientific and philosophical disciplines and proves itself a resource for coordinating them into a deeper and wider system of coherence.[12]

Niebuhr adheres to the Christian interpretation because he finds it superior to the other interpretations that are available, and he thinks he can explain that preference in terms that will make sense to others. To do so requires, however, a complex system of interpretations, taking up both the central meaning of the Christian faith and alternative ways of understanding the human situation, always with a view to that "vexing problem" that human beings put to themselves. Toward the beginning of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr explains this method succinctly: "[We] shall seek, on the one hand, to trace the various efforts within the Christian faith, to state the logic of this Biblical doctrine clearly against the constant perils of confusing admixtures from other, partially contradictory, views of man. On the other hand, we must seek to validate the Christian view by measuring the adequacy of its answer for human problems which other views have ignored or confused."[13]

In this complex interpretation, there is no one fixed point from which all the rest may be determined. Each step in the interpretation calls for critical judgment. The biblical understanding of human nature centers on the paradoxical relationship between the self-transcending freedom which human beings have because they are "made in the image of God" and the inescapable limitations which they encounter because they are finite creatures and not God.[14] Each attempt to state the "logic" of this biblical understanding involves separating what is integral to the biblical view from the other viewpoints that are commingled with it, sometimes quite appealingly.[15] The formulation of the biblical understanding is also influenced by the specific alternative views to which it is juxtaposed. The Christian Realist will formulate Christian doctrine differently to deal with a sentimental idealist's belief in the inevitability of human progress or to answer a cynical political realist's reduction of everything to a question of power. In that sense,

there is a "logic" that governs Christian interpretations of events, but there is no definitive formulation of the Christian understanding of human nature against which all other interpretations might be judged. The standard is one of relative adequacy to the human needs that we bring to the situation, and relative coherence with all the other things that we think we know by means of other scientific and philosophical methods.

THE CHRISTIAN REALIST AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

The relationship which Niebuhr sets up between the Christian Realist who interprets Christian doctrine and the doctrine which is interpreted is distinctive, and it requires further exploration if we are to understand the argument of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Reinhold Niebuhr sometimes found it important to his own identity to deny that he was a theologian, preferring to call himself a "teacher of social ethics."[16] He meant by that perhaps to be modest in his claims to understand the theological debates that preoccupied some of his colleagues, but his statement also points to the diversity of sources and perspectives that were important to his interpretative task. He drew heavily on theology, church history, and biblical studies in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, but he also relied on political theory, philosophy, social science, and law, and in many of his shorter works, explicit theological questions were eclipsed by political and economic issues.[17]

During the years after World War I, Protestant theologians both in Europe and in North America sought to disentangle core Christian beliefs from the ideas about national destiny, racial superiority, or the inevitability of human progress with which Christian faith had often been fused during the nineteenth century. Niebuhr's effort "to state the logic of this Biblical doctrine clearly against the constant perils of confusing admixtures from other, partially contradictory, views of man" reflects this more general concern among his contemporaries, but Niebuhr's way of approaching this goal was often quite different from theirs.

Karl Barth insisted that theology must become a "science of faith," proceeding like other systems of knowledge from its own first premises and refusing judgment on any issues which cannot be addressed from that starting point.[18] The theologian must rely only on the Word of God. Outside of that, theology has nothing to say.

Subsequent theologians have put less emphasis than Barth did on the positive content of theology, but they have also suggested that theologians do their proper work within a framework of discourse that is distinctive to the community of Christian faith. George Lindbeck speaks of a "grammar" of Christian doctrine that determines how language about God is properly used within the Christian community.[19] Apart from that grammar, we have no way to know whether a

theological assertion makes sense or not. To do social ethics in that context is primarily a matter of understanding the Christian community as the embodiment of social ethics in itself. The Christian narrative which the community shares gives rise to distinctive virtues which fit its members for its own life.[20] That shared life bears witness to a possibility that sets the Christian community apart from others, but the beliefs which sustain it cannot really be weighed and tested against alternatives. To understand Christian doctrine, one must know how to use the "grammar" on which it is constructed. It is pointless to ask how some other system of beliefs would fare if we tried to apply the same set of rules to it. One might as well ask whether a sentence of English words ordered by Hebrew grammar is true. Neither the question nor the sentence makes any sense.

Niebuhr's interpretative method sets up a very different relationship between the interpreter and the Christian faith. The "logic" of the biblical doctrine, or its "grammar," if you prefer (both Niebuhr's term and Lindbeck's are metaphors for the implicit rules by which we distinguish sense from nonsense in statements of the Christian faith) is not the only language that the believer knows. That is why we so often confuse the biblical understanding of human nature with other ideas that are widely shared in the culture. The fact that we know more than one "logic" or "grammar," however, also makes it possible to interpret the biblical doctrine to others (and sometimes to ourselves) by recasting its insights in terms drawn from psychology, or to understand the analogies between the slavery of the Hebrew people in Egypt and the slavery of African Americans before the Civil War, or to connect the care for the widow and the orphan that the biblical prophets enjoin with a societal responsibility for people who are economically vulnerable today. The very possibility of the "limited rational validation of the truth of the Gospel" which Niebuhr undertakes depends on a framework of discourse that is broader than the "logic" of Christian doctrine. Without that, we can explain neither the problems Christians have understanding what their faith means, nor the fact that they *do* understand it well enough to distinguish it from the alternatives.

Those who undertake to explain biblical faith and draw out its implications for contemporary life do this precisely by understanding the alternatives. Their confidence grows with experience, as the alternatives they explore consistently fail to guide actions and explain situations as well as the Christian interpretation does. At first, their intellectual commitment may be tentative and their ability to distinguish between biblical faith and other beliefs and values may be limited. Over time, the content of Christian teaching and its specific points of difference with other systems become better defined, and the intellectual identification between the believer and the beliefs grows closer. But it is important for Niebuhr that this identification is never complete. The interpretative task continues indefinitely, and Christian Realism's conviction of the "adequacy of its answer for human problems" depends on at least a measure of sympathy for the experiences that make other beliefs plausible to other people.

HUMAN DESTINY

In Niebuhr's theology, the final argument that would prove the case for Christian Realism and close the books on the alternatives always eludes us. This is not because the Christian Realist is weak in faith or a weak advocate for what faith today requires. Niebuhr himself gave tremendous energy to political causes and the audience for his Gifford Lectures did not hear a doubtful or ambiguous message. The lectures on "Human Destiny" began on October 11, 1939, a little over a month after the outbreak of World War II. Richard Fox recounts the effect they had on the listeners:

> [D]espite the war the audience remained faithful—even after Edinburgh itself was bombed in the middle of his third lecture. . . . Niebuhr was so wrapped up in his message that he heard nothing; he thought [the audience] were squirming about something he had said. [John] Baillie was surprised they came back for the rest of the lectures. But they probably stuck it out precisely because these were not standard Gifford lectures; they were inspirational if sometimes dense sermons on the Christian view of human destiny. If bombs were going to fall it made sense to make time three afternoons a week for some stirring reflections that went beyond tragedy.[21]

The incomplete case for Christianity that *The Nature and Destiny of Man* provides does not reflect any lack of conviction on Niebuhr's part. Rather, he believed that the biblical doctrine itself requires the incompleteness.

The chapters on "Human Destiny" point to a fulfillment of history that must lie outside of history. We can give some meaning to events by understanding the forces deep within human nature that drive these events. We can rise above tragedy by finding larger meanings that survive the loss of life and the destruction of things that we deeply value. But nothing that happens within history can clear up all of its ambiguities or turn its tragedies to triumphs. In cultures and religions where expectations of history are bounded by history, Niebuhr suggests, the inevitable conclusion is that history is meaningless. Mysticism and materialism offer relief by facing this meaninglessness frankly. Beliefs that hope for more than the consolation of an ultimate escape from history must, however, find a point beyond history on which to pin their hopes.

The paradigm case of this hope is the Messianic hope of biblical religion. But the specific way in which Christianity finds this Messianic hope fulfilled shows why the ultimate fulfillment must lie beyond history.

> [Christ] may be a stumblingblock because, though expected, he proves not to be the kind of a Messiah who was expected. In fact one can assert dogmatically that the true Christ *must* be a stumblingblock in the sense that he must disappoint, as well as fulfill, expectations. He must disappoint some expectations because Messianic expectations inevitably contain egoistic elements, which could

> not be fulfilled without falsifying the meaning of history. Every Messianic expectation contains an explicit or implicit assumption that history will be fulfilled from the particular locus of the civilization and culture which has the expectation.[22]

In other words, the very embeddedness of faith in history which makes interpretation necessary also ensures that no interpretation can achieve its implicit goal of making history meaningful from every perspective. The central claim of Christianity, that Jesus fulfilled the Messianic expectations of biblical faith precisely by disappointing them, decisively sets aside all claims to complete the project of giving meaning to history from within history. Neither our interpretations nor our actions can aspire to finality. Once this is clearly understood, the Christian Realist will try to disabuse those who think they have achieved a final answer of their illusions, and will join in efforts to liberate those who have been exploited by the people who hold these illusions.

Niebuhr opposes the shrill certainty of theologies that claim to have the last word, of course, but the most important problem in his writing is not Messianic certainty in religion, but the forms which that certainty takes in politics. Increasingly, after the publication of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, his writing is directed against Hitler's claims to have fulfilled the historical destiny of the German people, and against Marxist claims to have achieved the final political revolution that will make further political change impossible.

For that reason, too, Niebuhr turns his attention to political questions of tolerance and justice toward the close of his chapters on "Human Destiny."[23] If no form of government can overcome the ambiguities of history, then the task of Christian Realists must be to craft a way of living with those uncertainties and ambiguities in a political community. The demand that every political problem yield to a specific Christian solution betrays a lack of faith, because it insists that God's sovereignty over all of history must take a determinate cultural form within history. Christian Realism, by contrast, supports the checks and balances of constitutional democracy as the most appropriate form of government for human beings whose self-transcending freedom enables them to anticipate a meaningful history, even though their finitude ensures that they will never achieve it.

The measured affirmation of democracy in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* spoke to the needs of wartime political leaders who believed that their struggle against Nazism had moral and even religious dimensions, but who wanted to avoid the promise of a final conflict to "make the world safe for democracy" that led to so much disillusionment after the previous war. Niebuhr's realistic assessment of democracy as a system of government that can accommodate the moral uncertainty of history offered a plausible interpretation of events to those who faced the discipline and sacrifices of years of global warfare. It allowed them to believe in what they were doing without having to believe too much in their own virtue or to expect too much from their eventual victory.

CHRISTIAN REALISM AFTER "NATURE AND DESTINY"

Niebuhr drew out further implications of his interpretation of human nature for democratic politics in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, which was first published in 1944, and he wrote many essays on politics during the transition from World War II to the Cold War conflict with Soviet Communism.[24] By the end of the 1940s, he was internationally known not only as a theologian but as a political analyst whose interpretations pointed the way to a form of democracy that could deal with the real evils that threatened it and that did not rest its future on exaggerated hopes for human progress.

Because of Niebuhr's repeated warnings against expecting too much from our efforts to secure freedom and justice, Christian Realism was seen by many as a pessimistic way of looking at human nature and society. When *Time* magazine featured Reinhold Niebuhr on the cover of its twenty-fifth anniversary issue in 1948, it included along with the portrait a caption that read, "Man's story is not a success story."[25]

Niebuhr would certainly reject an interpretation of human history as a "success," a simple story of human progress. Christian Realism, however, is neither optimistic nor pessimistic. It accepts the ambiguity in human possibilities that follows inevitably from the tension between freedom and finitude in human nature. At the end of the twentieth century, there are few theologians who could share the conviction of the Social Gospel that humanity is on the verge of a social transformation that will realize the ancient promise of the Kingdom of God, nor would many political analysts any longer chart a future based on the inevitable progress of Western democracy and modern science. The alternative understandings of human nature against which Niebuhr had shaped his interpretation of the logic of the biblical doctrine have faded from the scene, swept away by the tide of events, but also in part by the very success of Niebuhr's argument that a human "success story" is impossible.

The logic of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* might seem to require at this point a new interpretation of Christian Realism which would remind a more pessimistic generation that "Man's freedom over the limits of nature in indeterminate regression means that no fixed limits can be placed on either the purity or the breadth of the brotherhood for which men strive in history."[26] For a variety of reasons, however, Christian Realism has remained associated in the minds of many readers with the limitations on social progress and institutional virtue which Niebuhr sought to impress on our consciousness at mid-century.

One reason for the persistence of these Niebuhrian formulations is that Niebuhr himself was not able to provide the necessary reassessment. His prodigious activity and literary output slackened after an illness in 1952 left him partly paralyzed, and although he continued to teach until his retirement from Union Theological Seminary in 1960, there would be no more works with the scope and

system of *The Nature and Destiny of Man.*

By the time of his death in 1971, Niebuhr's work so dominated the memory of his time that for most scholars in social ethics, Christian Realism simply meant the judgments and opinions that Reinhold Niebuhr had held on the issues of the day. Once Niebuhr had passed from the scene, these opinions became a benchmark against which subsequent writers measured their progress. Niebuhr had worked for racial justice since his early days as a pastor in Detroit, but from the perspective of the 1970s, his cautious warnings in the 1950s against expecting too much too soon from the Supreme Court's school desegregation decisions seemed to confirm the impression of some African American ethicists that Christian Realism was inherently conservative, unable to sympathize with the urgency and anger in their community.[27] Similarly, Niebuhr could hardly have guessed, even in 1971, how soon the very terminology of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* would become a signal for critical reassessment by feminist theologians and ethicists. The noninclusive language of the quotations from Niebuhr used in this Introduction calls attention to itself sharply when we read it today, and whatever we may think that Niebuhr would write if he were alive now, the discrepancy between his language and ours reminds us that twenty-five years after his death, Reinhold Niebuhr is no longer our contemporary.

As that distance in time increases, however, new possibilities emerge. Instead of treating *The Nature and Destiny of Man* as the definitive statement of Christian Realism, we can begin to read it by the method that Niebuhr himself proposed in its pages. We must state the "logic" of the Christian Realist understanding of human nature clearly, and separate out the "confusing admixtures from other, partially contradictory" views that Niebuhr himself may have held. Then, we must again for our time measure "the adequacy of its answer for human problems which other views have ignored or confused."

The array of problems will be different from those which Reinhold Niebuhr faced. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the bipolar superpower confrontation have changed beyond recognition the global landscape Niebuhr knew. New problems of environmental degradation and new economic relationships on a global scale have altered the balances he described, and new voices he could not have anticipated now cry for attention.

Yet beyond these limitations in Niebuhr's work which we can now see, his lasting contribution to Christian thought also becomes more clear. His realistic insistence that we attend both to human freedom and to human finitude may serve the future as well as his own writing served the past. His emphasis on the realities of power served to correct the optimistic assumptions of our culture at the beginning of the century. Now, in a time that seems dominated by the failures of technology and a fear of human limits, Christian Realism may require more emphasis on human possibility than Niebuhr's own writings usually allow. His insistence that we understand ourselves both as finite creatures of God and as created in God's own image will, however, continue to provide directions for Christian social ethics.

ROBIN W. LOVIN