**Reinhold Niebuhr and the Complexities of Sin**

Richard Rice

Sin is sometimes described as the only Christian doctrine for which there is abundant empirical evidence. Whether or not that's an exaggeration, the concept provides a perspective on human behavior notable for both its complexity and its practical applicability. And no theologian in the last century explored these two facets of sin more extensively than Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971). His theological account of human nature and his astute analysis of the human condition prove to be stunningly accurate time and again.[1]

Growing up in Illinois the son of a German immigrant, Niebuhr did not speak English fluently until he went to college. After attending Eden Theological Seminary and Yale Divinity School, he served as parish pastor in Detroit for thirteen years and in 1928 joined the faculty of Union Theological Seminary. The author of seventeen books and hundreds of articles, Niebuhr has been described as "one of the leading public intellectuals in America, and clearly the most significant theological voice in the land."[2] Many have commented on the role Niebuhr played as a public intellectual active during the worldwide political upheavals of the 1930s, '40s and '50s.[3] At a 1966 banquet in his honor, then U.S. Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey described Niebuhr as "one of the world's most profound political philosophers, scholars, theologians, and prophets," and said, "No preacher or teacher, at least in my time, has had a greater impact on the secular world. No American has made a greater contribution to political wisdom and moral responsibility."[4]

According to David Tracy, Niebuhr's theology was a unique blend of two traditions, classical Protestant liberalism, which reinterprets Christian doctrines in relation to modernity, and Neo-orthodoxy, inspired by Karl Barth, which challenges modern innocence about the adequacy

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[1] By the way, we all know something Niebuhr wrote, whether or not we knew that he wrote it. It is the famous serenity prayer he jotted down just before a worship service in New England in the summer of 1943. "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 the one from the other." After the service another attendee, Howard Chandler Robbins, dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, got the notes and included the prayer in a subsequent issue of the Cathedral news. From there it gradually made its way into the folklore of the nation, and came to be attributed to such diverse figures as Kurt Vonnegut and Adlai Stevenson, as well as being officially adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous. (Robert McAfee Brown, "Reinhold Niebuhr: A Study in Humanity and Humility," *Journal of Religion,* 54 [October 1974]: 327.)

[2] In the estimate of David Tracy, Niebuhr was "the finest American theologian since Jonathan Edwards, and perhaps the most profound religious realist in America since Abraham Lincoln. Like Edwards, Niebuhr never hesitated to summon explicitly Christian resources to understand the world and to explain his understanding to others. Like Lincoln, he … employed a Christian vision to cast a powerful light on our common history in its frightening and tragic ambiguity." ("Reinhold Niebuhr: God's Realist," in *Filaments: Theological Profiles*, Selected Essays, Vol. 2 [University of Chicago Press, 2020], 200).

[3] A comment by E.J. Dionne, columnist for *The Washington Post*. Quoted in "Obama's Favorite Theologian? A Short Course on Reinhold Niebuhr," in The Pew Forum's biannual Faith Angle Conference on religion, politics and public life (Key West, Fla., May 2009).

[4] Humphrey made these remarks at a banquet commemorating the 25th anniversary of *Christianity and Crisis* in New York City, February 25, 1966.

of Enlightenment reason to solve our problems.[5] In this "daring and original enterprise," Tracy continues, "Niebuhr rethought one of the most unlikely symbols in the Christian tradition: original sin," which portrays "the human predicament as a tangled combination of free will and the conflicts that it engenders."[6]

Niebuhr's concept of sin lies at the center of his best known work, *The Nature and Destiny of Man,* based on his Gifford Lectures of 1939.[7] In the opening paragraphs of this classic work, Niebuhr identifies human virtue as one of the "four paradoxes of human self-knowledge."[8] If we regard human beings as essentially good and attribute the presence of evil to social and historical causes, he argues, we find that historical and social evidences of evil are themselves the consequence of evil in humanity. On the other hand, if we regard ourselves as essentially evil, the question arises as to the standpoint from which we could make such a judgment. How can we be essentially evil if we are capable judging ourselves to be so? This implies a viewpoint that transcends both good and evil.

As Niebuhr interprets it, the biblically derived concept of sin captures the complexity of this essential paradox. Sin means that human evil is not the direct consequence of our involvement in nature, not finiteness itself, but the attempt to deny the limits of our finiteness and dependency. Though not strictly necessary, sin is nevertheless inevitable. Because we are both finite and free we are inherently anxious, and therefore subject to temptation. In this light, human sin is neither an act of sheer perversity nor an inevitable consequence of freedom and finiteness. Instead, it results from a misinterpretation of the our situation.

Sin thus contains elements of both ignorance and insecurity. And we can see them both in the various forms of pride. The pride of power involves ignorance of one's limitations on the one hand and insecurity regarding these limitations on the other. It may take form in the will-to-power or greed in striving to overcome its insecurity. Pride of knowledge involves the same two elements and is therefore both a result of ignorance of one's ignorance and an attempt to obscure one's ignorance by claiming finality of knowledge. Pride of virtue involves establishing one's own goodness as final righteousness and one's relative norms as absolute. When moral pride is transformed into spiritual pride, the prophetic instrument designed to check pride becomes instead an instrument on pride's behalf.

Sin thus arises from an inherent tendency to secure our own interests at any cost.[9] And the problem is not just the way we do things, it is the way we see things. Sin makes it virtually

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[5] "Reinhold Niebuhr: God's Realist," in *Filaments: Theological Profiles*, 200.

[6] Ibid., 199.

[7] *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (2 vols; Scribner's, 1939). Many believe it contains the most impressive interpretation of human sin since the writings of the great Reformers. Sin is not by any means the only anthropological concept that Niebuhr explores, but it is arguably the richest and almost certainly the one that generates the most widespread discussion.

[8] The other three he mentions are the place of human beings in nature, the value of human life, and the place of human beings in the universe.

[9] Although, as feminist thinkers have pointed out, it is also possible to exaggerate the importance of others to one's own detriment.

impossible for us to perceive our own needs and the needs of others with equal clarity. So, when we pursue our own interests at the expense of others, it seems like the perfectly logical thing to do. And if called on to explain ourselves, we are good at finding arguments to justify our actions. As Langdon Gilkey puts it, people consistently deny the motivations that equally consistently determine their conduct. We seek to serve ourselves in ways that give the appearance of serving some higher purpose, and we rely on our rational faculties to help us do this.[10]

According to Niebuhr, what is true of us as individuals is even more characteristic of human collectives, or groups. Groups also instinctively prioritize their own interests, but the selfishness of groups has different qualities. For one thing, it is less obvious since it involves a number of people, sometimes many, so it is more easy to rationalize and more difficult to counteract. In fact, the larger institutions become, Niebuhr argues, the easier it is to make their extravagant claims seem plausible. They can shroud self-interest with the garb of "country," "honor," and "glory" in ways that mere individuals never could. Not only are human institutions capable of greater pretension than individuals, they obviously have superior power, and, as the title, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* suggests, they also lack some of the moral resources that individuals have.[11]

Consequently, there is a fundamental distinction between the morality of individuals and that of groups. Because individuals have moral resources that are not available to groups, they are capable of higher moral attainments. On a personal level, people sometimes transcend their partial perspectives and perceive the true worth of other human beings. On rare occasions, individuals may even sacrifice their own interests in order to benefit others. But if such achievements are difficult for individuals, Niebuhr insists, they are impossible for groups. Human collectives—whether families, races, classes, nations, or churches—are notoriously incapable of self-criticism. So, when a group senses a threat to its security, it inevitably moves to protect itself. Indeed, every collective instinctively prioritizes its own interests. And those who argue in favor of institutional or collective privilege can be resourceful in finding justification for their preferences.

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[10] Langdon Gilkey, *Shantung Compound: The Story of Men and Women Under Pressure* (Harper & Row, 1966), 230. Gilkey's fascinating account of his two and a half years in a Japanese concentration camp in China during World War 2 concludes with a chapter that corroborates Niebuhr's complex analysis of human behavior, particularly under conditions of social pressure. Earlier in the book, Gilkey recounts one of his experiences as a representative of the housing committee. One of his assignments was to rearrange living spaces so that families with younger children had more room than they originally received. This required families with older children to downsize, and these parents consistently resisted the committee's request, offering various reasons for why they should be allowed to stay where they were. No matter how pressing the needs of others, Gilkey concluded, these people saw their own needs with greater clarity and invested them with greater importance.

[11] *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (Scribner's, 1932). It is significant that the book appeared in 1932, when the liberal vision of society transformed by Gospel principles was rapidly fading, due to the Great War in Europe and the Great Depression in the United States. But its hard-headed realism still seems applicable to the way institutions behave.

Due to the self-centered nature of a group's perspective, appeals to standards or ideals as a means of countering the injustice a person, or a minority, experiences will not be effective. The only effective response will be to invoke the self-interest of the larger community in some way. This is why, for Niebuhr, the way to achieve a rough approximation of justice, or equality, is to grant people in all segments of a society the capacity to act in their own interest. And this is why, if one finds oneself unjustly treated by an institution, or social entity, the only effective course of action is somehow to appeal to the self-interest of the larger entity. This typically involves a demonstration that granting the demands of a minority will also serve the interests of the larger community in some way.

The inevitability of self-interest thus plays an important role in Niebuhr's ethics. Since vast disproportions of power are inherently unjust, a distribution of power is essential to the achievement of justice. Why? Not because it actualizes the ideal of human equality, but because it gives everyone, or at least a wide variety of individuals, the opportunity act in their own interest. Thus, as Niebuhr puts, "[The human] capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but [the human] inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."[12] So even though people on an individual level may respond to appeals to charity or generosity, the only viable way to effect a change in group or corporate behavior is to show that it serves the interests of the group to do so. And the only way to make this possible is to grant minorities within the larger community the power to express and pursue their own interests.[13]

For Niebuhr, then, there is an essential connection between power and justice. For a society to be just, that is, to achieve an approximation of justice, there must be a distribution of power among its members. Reason alone is not enough to counteract personal interests. "Since reason is always to some degree the servant of interest in a social situation, social injustice cannot be resolved by moral and rational suasion alone…. Conflict is inevitable and in this conflict power must be challenged by power."[14] "The selfishness of human communities must be regarded as an inevitability. [I]t can be checked only by competing assertions of interest and these can be effective only if coercive methods are added to moral and rational persuasion."[15]

As these comments suggest, I have been most impressed with Niebuhr's insights into the complexities of human behavior, particularly the various and varied ways in which sin manifests itself in human experience. His anthropology provides a large-scale argument for the value of

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[12] *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense* (2d ed; University of Chicago Press, 2011), p.xiii. The simplest illustration of this is the strategy my great-grandmother reportedly used when two children wanted the same piece of pie. To insure that the portions would be evenly divided, she would ask one of them to cut the piece in two, and then let the other child choose which half he or she wanted.

[13] I took a class on the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr my first quarter of graduate school in Chicago and found impressive both his insights into the human situation and his remarkable gifts of expression. Living in the Second City during the years that Richard J. Daly was mayor and watching the Machine in operation provided continual illustrations of Niebuhr's observations on the manifold ways in which a well-organized and determined group of people may exercise inordinate social and political power.

[14] *Moral Man and Immoral Society,* xiv-xv.

[15] Ibid., 272.

religion in understanding human experience and the particular value of certain religious concepts. Niebuhr demonstrates that some of the central contents of Christian faith make sense of vast ranges of human experience, not only its disturbing and harmful dimensions, but also its positive possibilities. His anthropology also provides a solid basis for Christian ethics, with its appreciation for both idealism and realism.

Niebuhr's extensive application of Christian concepts to aspects of human social behavior provides a corrective to unwarranted individualism in our understanding of religious commitment.
Within conservative Protestantism, at least the Protestantism in which I was raised, sin is typically understood in personal terms. Sin is something of which we as individuals are guilty, and salvation is the divine response to this problem. It consists of absolving individuals of guilt and restoring their personal relationship to God. Hence, the familiar emphasis on baptism as the expression of an individual, indeed private, decision to accept God's forgiveness and surrender to the leading of the Holy Spirit in one's life. Accordingly, the church consists of a voluntary society of those who have individually accepted God's offer of salvation and committed themselves to an ongoing personal relationship with God that results in growth in character and service to others.

While accepting the view that sin is manifested in the life of every individual, I particularly appreciate Niebuhr's insights into the social dimensions of sin. From his perspective, human groups, of whatever sort—commercial, political, ethnic, national, or religious—exhibit an instinctive commitment to their own survival and success. And the essential self-serving nature of this commitment is often difficult for people to perceive because the value and importance of the group obviously transcends that of the individuals it includes. As a result, people who act, or are convinced that they are acting, on behalf of a larger community will instinctively relegate the interests of a minority to a status of lesser importance and award them diminished value.

Impressive as they are, Niebuhr's proposals have also been subjected to a number of criticisms. For one thing, his methodology is not entirely clear. Just why does he pick the biblical constructs he does? There are other aspects of Scripture than the ones that figure so prominently in his thought. Just how, for example, does he derive his anthropological conclusions from the biblical material? For another, in spite of its impressive aspects, some find his anthropology inadequate. While it reflects the preoccupations of the powerful, they observe, it fails to take into account the perspectives of the disenfranchised and oppressed. The socially marginalized, whether racially or sexually, will find little in his writings that addresses their specific forms of suffering. Pride is by no means the only manifestation of sin, or even the worst. And the solution to sin is not necessarily the appropriate use of power.

Others, however, would object to this characterization of Niebuhr's views, including prominent African Americans like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Barak Obama. In one of the papers he wrote at Boston University, King described Niebuhr's thought as "the necessary corrective of a kind of

liberalism that too easily capitulated to modern culture."[16] King also drew on Niebuhr's philosophy as a theological basis for nonviolent civil rights protest and linked Niebuhr's Christian realism to his own ideas of Gandhian nonviolence**,** calling it "a Niebuhrian stratagem of power."[17]

In an oft-cited 2007 interview with *New York Times* columnist David Brooks then-Senator Barack Obama spoke of his admiration for Reinhold Niebuhr. In response to the question, "Have you ever read Reinhold Niebuhr?" Obama replied, "He's one of my favorite philosophers." And he attributed to Niebuhr the compelling idea that "while there's serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain, and we should be humble and modest in our belief that we can eliminate those things, but we shouldn't use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction. … [W]e have to make these efforts knowing they are hard, and not swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism."[18]

A third criticism is that Niebuhr's theology of history is underdeveloped. A philosophy of history requires more than the application of anthropological constructs to the human enterprise writ large. Something specific in the way of tracing the course of history is needed. And fourth, many will find Niebuhr's eschatology unsatisfying. Without some meaningful content to the idea of history's end, what meaning does the course of history have?

Still, whatever the shortcomings or inadequacies of his work, Niebuhr's vivid ethical convictions, his penetrating social insights, and his arresting expressions continue to awaken admiration and stimulate discussion.

Because the moral resources of individuals and groups are so different, Niebuhr maintains that certain virtues lie beyond our corporate life. In particular, we cannot expect to find love and its highest expression, forgiveness, in the social arena.[19] But this is not to say they have no social value. Ideals can inspire us, even though "[t]hey elude empirical, collaborative political form."[20]

Niebuhr's views have been subjected to numerous criticisms, but his central insights into the morality of groups have enduring significance. And though he characteristically devotes most of his attention to the complexities of human existence and the limited applicability of Christian ideals, he nevertheless affirms their value, occasionally in ways that are poetically moving.

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[16] Cf. *King Encyclopedia,* The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, Stanford University.

[17] King invited Niebuhr to participate in the Selma to Montgomery March in 1965, and Niebuhr responded by telegram: "Only a severe stroke prevents me from accepting … I hope there will be a massive demonstration of all the citizens with conscience in favor of the elemental human rights of voting and freedom of assembly" (Cf. *King Encyclopedia,* The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, Stanford University).

[18] "Obama's Favorite Theologian? A Short Course on Reinhold Niebuhr," in The Pew Forum's biannual Faith Angle Conference on religion, politics and public life (Key West, Fla., May 2009).

[19] For Niebuhr, as we have seen, the most we can hope for from groups is a rough approximation of fairness or equality.

[20] *Reflections on the End of an Era* (Scribner's, 1934), p. 7.

Consider the combination of conceptual complexity and eloquent phrasing in this "send-up" of the great Pauline triad on faith, hope, and love.

> 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*.[21]

[21] *The Irony of American History* (Scribner's, 1952), p. 63.