
THDS. MLKP-MBU: Box 112.

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project

“Reinhold Niebuhr”

[2 April 1952]
[Boston, Mass.]

King prepared this outline for an oral report in DeWolf’s Seminar in Systematic Theology. Although King agrees with Niebuhr’s assessment of the “inevitable sterility of the humanistic emphasis,” he criticizes Niebuhr’s agnosticism as “unchristian.” King expanded these ideas in a later essay for the Dialectical Society.2

1. Biographical Sketch:

1. Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) was one of the most influential figures in American religious and political thought in the twentieth century. He received his B.D. (1914) and M.A. (1915) from Yale Divinity School. After pastoring a church in a working-class section of Detroit for thirteen years, Niebuhr began teaching at Union Theological Seminary in 1928, where he remained for the rest of his life. A politically active socialist during the 1920s and 1930s, he was editor of The World Tomorrow, the journal of the Socialist party. As a founder of the journal Christianity and Crisis and of the political group Americans for Democratic Action, he was an influential proponent of Christian or liberal realism. Among his voluminous writings are Does Civilization Need Religion? (1927), Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932), Reflections on the End of an Era (1934), An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935), The Nature and Destiny of Man (1941–1943), and Faith and History (1949). For more information, see Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought, ed. Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (New York: Macmillan, 1956); and Richard Wrightman Fox, Reinhold Niebuhr (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

In the early years of his training Niebuhr was greatly impressed with religious liberalism. Soon, however, he came to feel that the predominating theological liberalism of his time was not relevant to the concrete problems of life and daily experience.

2. Influences affecting his Thought:
Deeply influenced in his pastoral years by the plight of the worker in the Ford plant. Theological influences; Luther, Calvin, Augustine. Philosophical influences: Hegel (dialectics); Marxism; Heidegger; Kierkegaard.

3. Most Important Ideas:
(1) The Construction of Dialectical Theology: There is forever a dialectical tension between time and eternity. The whole of Christianity must be stated dialectically. The thesis of the Christian ethic is the endless possibilities for the fulfillment of brotherhood in history. This is the "wisdom of the cross". The antithesis is the "foolishness of the cross". Original sin makes the fulfillment of the rule of agape love impossible. The synthesis is "the power of the cross". Through faith and justification resources of grace are made accessible to the individual who remains within the pincers of the dialectic.

(2) Anthropology: There are three aspects of human experience which distinguish the Christian view of man from all other views. (1) "It emphasizes the height of self transcendence in man's spiritual stature in its doctrine of image of God". (2) It insists on man's weakness, dependence, and finiteness . . . . regarding this finiteness, as, of itself a source of evil in man. (3) It affirms that the evil in man is a consequence of his inevitable, though not necessarily unwillingness, to acknowledge his dependence". (NDM, I, 150).

(3) Sin: "Sin is occasioned precisely by the fact that man refuses to admit his creatureliness. . . . He pretends to be more than he is". (NDM, I, 16). Both the fall of man and original sin are accepted by Niebuhr as mythological categories to explain the universality of sin.

3. King's earlier draft is more expansive: "As the result of his pastoral work among the workers in the Ford plant, and of his own social observation, Niebuhr came to comprehend the profoundly tragic and contradictory character of human nature as manifested in social and economic relationships. It was here that he developed his profound and personal interest and concern in the exploited classes of capitalist society" ("Draft, Reinhold Niebuhr," 2 April 1952, MLKP-MBU: Box 115).

4. After the word "Marxism" King wrote in the rough draft: "(Marx is wise in understanding that men always demand more than either security requires or justice permits, and so must be restrained by force or power.)"

Philosophy of History: The final problem of history becomes the fact that "before God no man living is justified." Since it is impossible to act in accord with the ethical ideals of Christianity in history, the problems of grace, judgement and redemption become crucial ones.

Christology: Christ is the moral absolute which stands outside of history to exhaust the freedom of man but sufficiently in history to clarify history's possibilities and limitations.

God: God is Creator, Judge, and Redeemer. Yet God's existence and nature are inexplicable and incomprehensible to man. Because of his limitation man can never understand the ways of God.

4. Critical Evaluation:
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. Yet we may ask if Niebuhr's views are as orthodox and Biblical as he assumes them to be. We may also question his agnosticism as to the nature of God as being unchristian.

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6. There is an additional sentence in the draft: "Good can never triumph over evil in history, due to the limitations of human nature."

7. In the draft this section begins, "Christ is the moral solution to the predicament of man."

8. The citation in the draft is "NDM, I, 163, 170, 258–59."

9. Walter G. Muelder, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Conception of Man," The Personalist 26 (July 1945): 284: "In commenting on Niebuhr's claims it may be said at the outset that his views are probably less orthodox and certainly less Biblical than he assumes them to be."

"Reinhold Niebuhr's Ethical Dualism"

9 May 1952

In this essay for DeWolf's Seminar in Systematic Theology, King examines Niebuhr's views both on the role of love and justice in society and on the tension between individual and corporate ethics. He agrees with Niebuhr's critique of the most idealistic forms of perfectionism but criticizes his pessimism about the transforming power of agape. "He is right," King wrote, "in insisting that we must be realistic regarding the relativity of every moral and ethical choice," but Niebuhr failed "to see that the availability of the divine Agape is an essential affirmation of the Christian religion." DeWolf gave the essay an A — and commented: "Excellent interpretation and exposition. I wish the critical evaluation had been carried further. The beginning looked promising."