

The Christian World-View

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Based Primarily on an Interpretation of Christian Ethics by Reinhold Niebuhr

As we examine Christian theology, we often lose sight of the life and teachings of Jesus himself, for he was not a theologically oriented person. He did not study God, but rather he experienced Him. With his untimely death and resurrection, Christian theology (and its application as day-to-day ethics) had its somewhat unsure beginnings. Its first exponent, Paul, viewed the life and teachings of Jesus from a Mosaic standpoint. As the Christian church broadened geographically from a Jewish national to a more universal foundation, its theology was compelled to change accordingly.

Throughout the last two thousand years of the New Testament Age, then, the Jewish-national teachings of Jesus have been expanded to the world-wide level by Paul, Augustine, Luther, Swedenborg, and many others. Today we find more than three hundred denominations claiming to be the rightful heirs in Jesus' spiritual lineage.

Perhaps by examining more closely "normative" Christianity i.e., those aspects of the Christian world-view upon which most of these denominations would agree we can begin to bridge the painful gap between other-worldly Christian theology and practical, every day Christian living. This, then, is the task before us.

"Normative" Christian theology equals separateness

For the most part, the Christian world-view is dominated, on many levels, by a feeling of separateness-which eventually leads to isolation and alienation. In particular, three of these levels center on the relationship between the Ideal World and the World of Reality, between God and His creation, and between God and man.

The Ideal and Reality are often far apart for the Christian. Niebuhr remarks that:

The measure of Christianity's success in gauging the full dimension of human life is given in its love of perfectionism, on the one hand, and in its moral realism and pessimism, on the other.

In *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* Niebuhr repeatedly draws a sharp contrast between the world of which man's mind is a part, and the harsh reality of everyday life. The Ideal World is associated with abstractions such as truth, beauty, and goodness. It is the world of myth, while the Real World is characterized as the world of nature, time and history.

Furthermore, not only do Christians experience the two worlds separately, but also they have disparate experiences of God and creation. They think of God as a perfect Being, while His creation is imperfect and full of "natural" evils such as cancer. To Niebuhr, the world "was not a perfect harmony even before human sin created confusion."

This point of view was first expounded by Paul, who spoke primarily of the separateness between God and man. In his Letter to the Romans he said "only God is true and no man is wholly perfect" (3:4), thus placing man and God in two separate and distinct realms of existence.

With respect to man, God plays two basic roles according to normative Christian thinking. He is seen as Creator and Judge, evoking feelings of gratitude (for the gift of life) and contrition (for having sinned.) Christian prayer is usually seen as a monologue, then, in which the devotee limits his relationship to God to the words and attitudes conjured up by just these two emotions.

In simple Christianity (which might be referred to as Christianity of the heart rather than of the mind) God plays the additional role of loving Father. Through His love for man, He gives to Jesus the mission of bridging the gap between man and Himself, i.e. the role of Messiah. This act also evokes from man a response of gratitude, for the gift of eternal life through Christ. Through his faith in Christ, by the grace of God, man is lifted from the pit of hell-on-earth. Niebuhr says:

The ethical demands made by Jesus are incapable of fulfillment in the present existence of man. They proceed from a transcendent and divine unity of essential reality, and their final fulfillment is possible only when God transmutes the present chaos of this world into its final unity.

This brief synopsis of fundamental Christian theology allows us to examine more closely the Ideal towards which the Christian strives.

The Christian ideal

The search for unity is a significant part of the Christian's outlook. Often this search is an unconscious one; nevertheless, a remedy for the separateness of existence must be found. It is a frustrating search, though, for the Ideal which the Christian seeks is acknowledged by Niebuhr and others to be an impossible one to achieve. Let us examine it more closely to see why this is so.

The Christian Ideal involves four basic elements, each representing a particular facet of man's quest for unity. Mystery characterizes the striving for unity in a non-rational way; mythology represents the search for ideological wholeness on a supra-rational level; moral action is the ideal which represents unity of theory and practice; and moral pessimism is the inevitable result (according to Niebuhr) of man's striving for the Impossible Ideal.

Regarding mystery, Niebuhr notes that "the meaning of life transcends the observable facts of existence." In other words, the meaning of life is not part of the reality which we experience, but rather it is part of that Ideal, or mythical, World beyond us. It remains known (and knowable) to God alone. Saint Paul recognized the frustrations which are likely to occur as a result of this predicament.

He said:

I thank God for deliverance through our Lord Jesus Christ. Now therefore with my mind I am a servant of the law of God; but with my flesh I am a servant of the law of sin. (Romans 7:25)

It is the mystery of sin with which man is confronted in his struggle to realize the Ideal. His only response, in the Christian perspective, is to reply with unyielding, irrational faith. Niebuhr says:

... There is a mystery of evil in human life to which modern culture has been completely oblivious.

Jesus made demands upon the human spirit, which no finite man can fulfill, without explicitly admitting this situation.

Man, however, is a stubborn creature. He cannot live with "eternal mysteries" that are beyond his ken. Therefore, he has developed a supra-rational symbology for grasping that which it is beyond the power of words to describe. Mythology is man's attempt to unravel the mysteries of life. It is, as Carl Jung noted, "the expression of what happens to man in his soul."

The three fundamental myths of Christianity, as well as of the major world religions, are the Creation story, unravelling the mystery of where man comes from; the myth of the Fall, explaining where evil comes from (since God is good and did not create it Himself); and the Hero theme, illustrating how evil will be overpowered by God's chosen instrument, who is usually a warrior. The Crucifixion and

Resurrection beliefs of Christianity fit into this last category.

Mythology is the tool by which man seeks to unify his understanding of the Ideal. The application of this understanding to Real World situations Niebuhr calls "moral action." He sees it in terms of our commitment to the Ideal.

Every truly moral act seeks to establish what ought to be, because the agent feels obligated to the ideal, though historically unrealized, as being the order of life in its more essential reality.

For the Christian, this moral effort poses a serious problem, because it is never quite successful. Niebuhr, as previously stated, believes the Christian Ideal to be unattainable. Therefore any progress which we think we are making in that direction is merely self-deception. Trapped in the world of sin, we are forced to lament with St. Paul, "I do not understand my own actions, for I do the very thing I hate..." (Romans 7: 14).

Thus, confronted with the mystery of evil, the Christian resorts to mythology in order to untangle the web and free himself from the powers of evil. Based on this mythological interpretation of theology, he seeks to act in a moral and upright fashion and thus join the two worlds as one. The forces of evil, however, are too great to be reckoned with. They overwhelm him, forcing him into pessimism and despair. As Niebuhr says:

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

Reality

Looking towards the Ideal, the kingdom of which Jesus spoke so passionately, the sensitive Christian finds himself immersed in sin. He sees history as a series of bloody wars and violent social upheavals; civilization as the march of crime, pestilence, and oppression across the globe; and knowledge as the tool by which the unjust have gained power. He agrees with Niebuhr that "the whole of human history reveals to what degree human finiteness and sin enter into all human actions and attitudes."

What is sin? Georgia Harkness, in *Christian Ethics*, defines it as "any attitude or act in which one rebels against, or fails to be adequately responsive to, the love commandment of Jesus." Harsh as this may sound, it is in strict accord with Pauline theology, which states quite clearly that "all have sinned and are short of the glory of God...." (Romans 3: 23).

There is, however, a way out. Paul continues the line quoted above by recognizing that:

...They are freely given righteousness by the grace of God through the salvation which is in Jesus Christ.... (Romans 3:24)

Though the reality of sin makes true Christian living an impossibility, salvation can still come to the Christian who has faith in Christ. Through the cross, the gulf between the Ideal and the Real can be bridged.

Redemption through the cross

Niebuhr's Christianity insists:

... quite logically, that this ultimate hope becomes possible only to those who no longer place their confidence in purely human possibilities.

Repentance is thus the gateway into the Kingdom of God.

Responsibility for man's salvation, then, lies with God and not with man. We must wait patiently until God "transmutes the present chaos of this world into its final unity." Receiving grace is comparable to the establishment of a new personal covenant with God. This covenant is not without its obligations. Because God loved our fellow man, we are obliged to love him too. Niebuhr says: The obligation is derived... from the transcendent unity of essential reality.

This obligation, however, is a limited, or conditional, one. It goes only so far, as Georgia Harkness realizes:

Not only by civil law and custom but by the obligations of Christian love it is wrong to sacrifice one's wife or husband or children to a diffused idea of "serving humanity."

Thus, having retraced our way through the various phases of salvation, i.e., recognition of one's own

sinful nature; repentance; faith in God's ability to save us through His grace; and receiving His grace and the concomitant obligations of love; we come to the instrument of grace itself: Christ.

Conclusion

Grace through Christ then means the occurrence of a miraculous event. Somehow God must join the world of myth and the world of time and nature He must "step into history." Until then, however, we are faced with Niebuhr's moral pessimism. He says:

The effort to elaborate the religio-moral thought of Jesus into a practical socio-moral or even politico-moral system usually has the effect of blunting the very penetration of his moral insights.

When, for instance, liberal Christianity defines the doctrine of non-resistance, so that it becomes merely an injunction against violence in conflict, it ceases to provide a perspective from which the sinful element in all resistance, conflict, and coercion may be discovered.

It is here that I take the strongest objection to Niebuhr. Unable to live the teachings, nor follow the example, of Jesus, he sees Christians as awaiting God's supernatural intervention through Christ. Having placed their salvation in God's hands alone, it is no wonder that modern Christians (including Niebuhr) do not speak with great expectation of the Second Coming.

In fact, they rarely speak of it at all. Yet, in order to prepare mankind for that cosmic event, won't God reveal His Will to us (when the time is ripe) just as He told Noah of the coming flood, and Abraham of the destruction of Sodom? We would do well to remember the words of Jesus himself:

...if the master of the house knew at what watch the thief would come, he would keep awake and would not let his house be plundered.

For this reason, you also should be ready, for the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. (Matthew 24:43-44)

Experiencing the reality and increasing power of evil and sin, aren't Christians in need of a Second Coming in our time? Though Niebuhr does not see it as a particular event in history, it seems to me to be the fulfillment and crowning point of both Christian theology and Christian living, the point in history at which the Ideal and the Real, having touched through the First Advent, will be inseparably joined.