THE ETHICS OF RESPONSIBILITY– A COMPARISON OF THE MORAL METHODOLOGY OF H. RICHARD NIEBUHR AND CHARLES CURRAN

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Even though H. Richard Niebuhr has been dead for over ten years, his creative contributions in Christian ethics are still having an influence in contemporary discussion. And one of the most interesting features of this discussion is that it has taken on a progressively more ecumenical flavor. Charles Curran, who teaches moral theology at Catholic University, has been in the forefront of the efforts since Vatican II to renew Catholic moral theoolgy. In the process of this rethinking, he has shown a great interest in Richard Niebuhr's ethics of responsibility. In this article, I will compare the theological positions out of which each of these men has presented a version of the ethics of responsibility. It is my contention that, although they employ a similar language, Niebuhr and Curran are far apart in some of their basic theological presuppositions. By making these differences explicit, I hope to contribute to the ongoing discussion.

H. RICHARD NIEBUHR–

There is no clearcut division in Niebuhr's work between theology and ethics.[1] To ask about man's moral life is inevitably to ask about God and about neighbor and about the bond which links them. Ultimately, there is an ethical concern in all of Niebuhr's writings.

Richard Niebuhr was preoccupied with the problem of historical relativism (which he took to be the central problematic of our time). In an attempt to overcome this problem, he developed a theology which has three basic roots: a radically monotheistic faith stance, a relational theory of value and a confessional view of the Church. Out of this understanding of Christian life, he proposed that an 'ethics of responsibility' was the most adequate approach for doing Christian ethics.

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[1]With the proviso that such a division is purely arbitrary, it is still possible to make reference to those writings of Niebuhr which would fall under a more traditional classification of 'ethical' material. These include: *The Responsible Self* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963); *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic* (New York: International Missionary Council, 1929); *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952); "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," *The Gospel, the Church and the World,* ed. Kenneth Scott Latourette (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946); "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," *The Heritage of the Reformation,* ed. E. J. F. Arndt (New York: Richard R. Scott. 1950); *Christian Ethics: Sources of the Living Tradition,* ed. with introduction by Waldo Beach and H. Richard Niebuhr (New York: Ronald Press, 1950); and "Religion and Ethics," *World Tomorrow,* XIII (1930).

I will first give a brief description of each of these theological themes and then describe the specific formulation Niebuhr gave to the ethics of responsibility.

A. *Historical Relativism.* It was Ernst Troeltsch who was the decisive influence on Niebuhr's early theological thought. In his famous study *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches,*[2] Troeltsch portrayed the influence of economic, political and social factors on the development of successive or simultaneous, versions of the Christian ethic. He sought to establish the nature of the interplay between the sociohistorical situation and theological reflection. Niebuhr himself follows Troeltsch's lead in his early work, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*[3] where he renders a telling indictment of the compromised condition of the Christian Gospel as it was progressively enervated by economic, ethnic, geographical and racial factors in the history of American Protestantism.

In his later works, Niebuhr was much less deterministic in his orientation, but he never changed his mind about the importance of taking relativity seriously. For example, in *The Meaning of Revelation* in a well-known and striking image, Niebuhr attempted to depict the inevitability of our time-boundedness.

> From the point of view of historical beings we can speak only about that which is also in our time and which is seen through the medium of our history. We are in history as the fish is in water and what we mean by the revelation of God can be indicated only as we point through the medium in which we live.[4]

For Niebuhr, there is no area of man's activity which can escape the effects of historical relativism—not even theology. In fact, in *Christ and Culture* he suggests that the Church is never free from the danger of theological compromise when it chooses a strategy to relate to the culture of its time.

All of Richard Niebuhr's efforts as a theologian involved him in a search for the answer to the problem of historical relativism.[6] Both

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[2]Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches,* trans. by Olive Wyon, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Bros., 1960).

[3]New York: Henry Holt, 1929.

[4]New York: Macmillan, 1941, pp. 35-36.

[5]New York: Harper & Bros., 1952.

[6]None of the major commentators on Niebuhr's theology doubts the centrality of the theme of historical relativism. Cf. John Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1970, pp. 15, 29, 82. 96, 102, 105; Donald Damhorst, *Social Norms and Protestant Ethics: The Ethical Views of Reinhold Niebuhr and H. Richard Niebuhr* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1963), pp. 54, 56-61, 79-84, 94; Lonnie Kliever, *Methodology and Christology in H. Richard Niebuhr* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1963), pp. 58-60, 70-72; Libertus Hoedemaker, *The Theology of*

individuals and groups were conditioned by their participation in specific economic groups, classes, nations and races, and by their utilization of available languages, cultures and worldviews. Men not only existed in the flux of history but each man had his own personal history which constituted an inherent obstacle to the attainment of a transhistorical or ahistorical point of view.

B. *Radical Monotheism.* For Niebuhr, the basic question to be asked of every individual and of every society was not whether it had a faith but whether the form of its faith was adequate to the revelation upon which it was based. This question presupposed that the story of human history was one of competing faiths, not of faith versus non-faith. It is in the description of the various forms of faith that Niebuhr distinguishes radical monotheism from the other alternatives.

In *Radical Monotheism* Niebuhr defines "faith" as "the attitude and action of confidence in, and fidelity to, certain realities as the sources of value and the objects of loyalty."[7] In modern culture there are three basic faiths which have contended for the allegiance of men: (1) radical monotheism (2) polytheism and (3) henotheism.

'Radical monotheism' is the faith-stance which refuses to absolutize any finite value or principle but which continually looks to the source of unity which supercedes and supports all the great variety of historical existences.

> Its reference is to no one reality among the many but One beyond all the many, whence all the many derive their being, and by participation in which they exist. As faith, it is reliance on the source of all being for the significance of the self and of all that exists.[8]

The difficult tension with which the radical monotheist must ever live is that between continual iconoclasm and appropriate respect for the relative.

> Radical monotheism dethrones all absolutes short of the principle of being itself. At the same time it reverences every relative existent. Its two great mottoes are: 'I am the Lord thy God; thou shalt have no other gods before me' and 'Whatever is, is good.'[9]

There are two other forms of modern faith. 'Polytheism' inclines

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H. Richard Niebuhr (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970), pp. 7-18, 94; James Fowler, *To See the Kingdom: The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1974), p. 49-51, 169-172.

[7] *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture,* with supplementary essays (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), p. 16.

[8] *Ibid.,* p. 32.

[9] *Ibid.,* p. 37.

man to live a fickle kind of life, jumping from one value to another without ever attempting to reconcile the competing claims to absoluteness. It is as if man's earthly venture were made up of isolated and independent goals (e.g., wealth, honor, patriotism, etc.) with corresponding tactical choices. However, it is 'henotheism' (which arbitrarily assigns preeminence to one among the available centers of value) which is the most virulent and deceptive opponent to monotheism. Its most obvious contemporary form is nationalism (e.g., Nazism and Fascism) and various other kinds of social faith, from the class orientation of Marxism to the glorification of a specific culture and civilization.

Each of the three forms of faith in the modern world is characterized by the nature of the value-center to which it is loyal. When they are assessed from within the perspective of the Christian community, only radical monotheism is an adequate faith, for it alone maintains the integrity of the Absolute, that is, allows God to be God.

C. *Relational Theory of Value.* Niebuhr developed his relational theory of value in two pivotal essays.[10] In his first essay, he was concerned with defending four basic postulates: (i) Values are not simply a subjective projection of man; they are also objective. (ii) God is prior to, and independent of, any other standard of valuation. (iii) That has the value of deity for man which values man. (iv) The experience of valuation is relational, that is, man attributes the highest value to that which gives him value. Behind each of these statements was the desire to qualify value relativism by showing how all values are dependent upon the Absolute.

In his second essay "The Center of Value" he suggests that "Value is present wherever one existent being with capacities and potentialities confronts another existence that limits or completes or complements it."[11] For value to be present there must be at least two beings in relation. However, the key to the *religious* dimension of his value theory is that good is defined in terms of 'a being for which other beings are good.' This Absolute is the God who is not only the principle of unity and being but also the principle of value. God, self and neighbor (a triad) are mutual participants in a never ending process of relation, evaluation and response.

By positing God as the 'Center of Value,' he assented to the relativity of human ethical insight without disparaging its objectivity.

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[10]Richard Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," *The Nature of Religious Experience: Essays in Honor of Douglas Clyde Macintosh,* edited by J. S. Bixler, R. L. Calhoun and H. R. Niebuhr (New York: Harper & Bros., 1937) and "The Center of Value" in *Radical Monotheism,* pp. 100-113.

[11]"The Center of Value," p. 103.

By showing the correspondence between being and value, he exposed the precarious and deceptive nature of independent or transcendent values. By highlighting the multidimensionality of being, he opened the way for a further clarification of the triadic structure of human relations.

D. *Confessional View of the Church.* For Niebuhr, the problem of how the Absolute could be known in a way specific and forceful enough to be helpful was answered in terms of conceiving the Christian Church to be basically a community of memory and expectation revolving around the life and message of Jesus Christ.

In his book *The Meaning Revelation*[12] he made a distinction between two kinds of apprehension of history—external and internal. 'External history' is the witnessing of events from the outside as an impartial spectator. It is impersonal and objective. In contrast to this, 'internal history' is the comprehension of events from within as part of participation in a personal and communal context of significance. Therefore, to 'confess' is to speak from a sense of history which is not universally self-evident, but which can be formulated in terms which have a rational consistency and a built-in principle of correction. Only people who can collectively say 'this is *our* history' share this fundamental perspective.

In the Church the collective memory is mediated through certain documents (especially the Bible) and certain rites (especially the sacraments) which attempt to mediate the One to successive generations of believers. The goal of the community is to relate these past events to the concerns of the present in such a way that Christ remains 'contemporaneous.' The Christian church *confesses* that God has spoken to historical man in a special way through Jesus Christ. This group can only explain itself in historical terms. When it seeks to *apologize* for these historical limitations, it loses its integrity in a misguided effort to achieve ahistorical certainty and validation.

E. *Recapitulation.* Each of these theological themes is dependent upon and related to the other. A radically monotheistic faith asserts that only the Absolute can be a sufficient object of man's trust and loyalty. A relational theory of value claims that the Absolute which is the principle of being is also the principle of value, that is, that the good can only be known and defined in terms of man's relationships. The confessional view of the Church identifies a concrete historical community as the instrument of the revelation of the Absolute and as the initiator of loving concern for good in the world.

[12]New York: The Macmillan Co., 1941.

Without radical faith, there would be no ultimate value and no reality for the Church to symbolize. Without a relational theory of value, the Absolute would be predefined according to a relative standard and the ethical task of the Church would be subject to the extremes of worldliness and isolationism. Without a confessional view of the Church, the Absolute would have no community to pass on revelation through history and the world would continue to order itself according to a misplaced value system.

It is my claim that Niebuhr's 'ethics of responsibility' is dependent on his answer to the theological problem of historical relativism—that is, the relation between the One and the many, the Absolute and the relative. His ethics is not a separate and independent proposal, but an integral part of his overall theological concern.

F. *The Ethics of Responsibility.* In *The Responsible Self* Niebuhr perceived three dominant modes in the history of ethics: teleological, deontological and responsibility. (i) The 'teleological' approach concentrates on man-the-maker, the being who acts toward an ideal or end. It employs a technical model in which man rationally assesses various alternatives in light of the question, 'what is my good, ideal or telos?' Aristotle and Aquinas were the key advocates of this method, which Niebuhr himself finds too individualistic. (ii) The 'deontological' approach thinks in terms of man-the-citizen, with basically a political model in mind. Here it is the law, both as understood and adhered to, which dominates in the evaluation. Man must first ask, 'what is the law?' or what is right?' Only then is ethical action possible. Kant is a representative figure in this tradition, which appossible. Kant is a representative figure in this tradition, which appears too impersonal for Niebuhr. (iii) The 'responsibility' approach conceives of man as answerer, engaged in a dialogic interaction with neighbor and God. He is to respond to a challenge, to a personal summons. In this instance, man first wants to know, 'what is going on?' Only then can the fitting action be discerned. The prime value of a responsibility ethic is that it stresses the social character of selfhood.

According to Niebuhr, four elements are included in the theory of responsibility: (a) *response*—it brings into play human volition; (b) *interpretation*—response always depends on the context in which activity was initiated by another; (c) *accountability*—when a man responds, he enters into a continuing relationship with other actors; and (d) *social solidarity*—once a pattern has been established, all actions are connected by the integrity of the individual agent and by the

persistence of a community of agents. Thus he defines the pattern of responsibility as "the idea of an agent's action as response to an action upon him in accordance with his interpretation of the latter action and with his expectation to his response, and all of this in a continuing community of agents."[14]

A close examination of Niebuhr's 'ethics of responsibility' reveals the central place of the three basic theological positions: a monotheistic faith stance, a relational theory of value and a confessional conception of the Church. His monotheism is evident at every turn. God, the Absolute, is that being who assures the continuaton of every ongoing series of alteractions. He is that transcendent being referred to by the third party in every interactional triad. He is the being upon which every self is dependent and in terms of which the final context of existence is shown to be redemptive. But this Absolute God is only known by man through his social relations.

By reflecting on the values in his life, man finds that they are both objective and relative at one and the same time. Yet he realizes that some ultimate criterion is always at work in all the judgments he makes. When he reaches the point where he recognizes the fact that he has value himself only because he has already been valued, he comes to see that the principle of being is also the principle of value—that the Absolute is implicitly present in all his valuations. From the perspective of an 'ethics of responsibility' this means that all of being must be included in the realm of man's responsibility. Because 'whatever is, is good,' responsibility has a universal inclusiveness.

As a symbolic being, man needs to be sustained in his moral life by appropriate symbols and metaphors. It is relative to this function that Jesus Christ can be presented as the paradigm of responsibility. Jesus is that person who best exemplified the principle: 'respond to all actions upon the self as actions of God.' He always did the 'fitting thing' by discerning the ultimate context of human action which he found to be 'universal responsibility in a universal community.' Jesus' paradigmatic function has been preserved for countless generations of his disciples through their participation in that community of memory and hope called the Christian Church. This Church is a place of sustenance and a creative center of that resymbolization of the Gospel message which man's historical nature requires. It is through the

[13]The Best studies of Niebuhr's 'ethics of responsibility' can be found in the following works: James Fowler, *To See the Kingdom;* John Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr;* Libertus Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr;* and Rexford Tucker, *H. Richard Niebuhr and the Ethics of Responsibility.*

[14]Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self,* p. 65.

Church that the symbol of responsibility can be explicated most sensitively and implemented most pervasively.

According to Niebuhr, the 'ethics of responsibility' is a realistic approach to ethics because it faces up to man's *relativity;* it also provides an *objective* rooting for his judgments. Man-the-responder is confined to a given structure of social interaction. The 'fitting' thing to do is not determined in advance, but rather is discovered in the process of deciding 'what is going on.' One of the factors which must be taken into account in this critical process is that man is a creature of history, influenced by his personal and collective past, yet capable of ever new evaluations of this legacy. Out of these reinterpretations of the past man forges a new level of freedom prepared to face the future with assurance and hope.

There is a *givenness* to the social and historical existence of *homo dialogicus.* He makes his decisions within certain circumscribed limits. He participates in the relativity of the species. But there is a second truth about man's moral life, a complementary facet of his experience. Within the social form of triadic interaction, within the historical compresence of successive generations, man perceives that he is dependent, that there is some ultimate cause and some ultimate support which has brought him into existence and which calls him to an ultimate form of responsibiilty. This one beyond the many is the Lord of history who guarantees that all men's projects will be brought to completion and that the final meaning of history is redemptive. While man's comprehension of this objective foundation for his ethical life is always partial, nevertheless in his faith he confesses that this principle of value, to which Jesus Christ pointed, is the basis of his trust and the object of his loyalty.

Charles E. Curran

Like his great teacher Bernard Haring, much of Charles Curran's interest in methodological questions has come from his grappling with concrete issues in the contemporary Church. It is characteristic of his own writing that he often seeks to popularize the creative work of more systematic thinkers, always testing their theories by the experience of contemporary Christians.

Curran has given his approbation to many of the post-Vatican II efforts at renewal in Catholic moral theology. He too found the manualistic approach too legalistic and sin-centered. What was needed was a new stress on growth, dynamism and creativity. This meant that the categories of interpretation had to be more personal, historical and relational than before. In a special way, moral theology

needed to be in touch with developments in other areas of theology (particularly in dogma and Scripture) and with the perspectives of the social sciences.[15]

For the purposes of analysis, the discussion of Curran's writings on methodology will be subdivided into four parts: natural law theory, his understanding of Niebuhr, his own ethics of responsibility, and his proposal for a theology of compromise.

A. *Natural Law Theory.* Charles Curran proposes that natural law needs to be reinterpreted in such a way that it is seen as more biblical, personalist and dynamic.[16] It is neither a detailed set of norms nor an exact program for human conduct. Instead, natural law is a God-given destiny which can only be worked out experientially and reflectively.

Traditional natural law theory is subject to three major weaknesses: (i) it tends to view natural law as a monolithic system with an established content; (ii) it is prone to a kind of physicalism which makes biological processes definitive of human value; (iii) it relies on a classicist world-view which fails to appreciate the importance of human history and development. Curran is convinced that St. Thomas Aquinas' statement of natural law theory can be rendered acceptable by paying attention to these weaknesses and by recognizing that it can be validated by correcting them. Thomas wanted to uphold two values which are still essential to true morality—first, that all men share a common source of ethical wisdom[17] and second, that morality is more than the subjective preference of an individual or group.

Curran never disassociates himself from a natural law position. But he goes to great pains to indicate his dissatisfaction with the grandiose claims once made for this method of analysis. In particular, he questions the existence of very many (if any) negative moral absolutes. After finishing a summary of Thomas' view of natural law he says,

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[15]Cf. *Christian Morality Today* (Notre Dame: Fides, 1966); *A New Look at Christian Morality* (Notre Dame: Fides, 1968); *Contemporary Problems in Moral Theology* (Notre Dame: Fides, 1970); *Catholic Moral Theology in Dialogue* (Notre Dame: Fides, 1972); *Politics, Medicine and Christian Ethics: A Dialogue With Paul Ramsey* (Phil.: Fortress, 1973); *New Perspectives in Moral Theology* (Notre Dame: Fides, 1974).

[16]Curran's view of natural law appears primarily in three articles: "Natural Law and the Teaching Authority of the Church," *Christian Morality Today,* pp. 74-92; "Absolute Norms in Moral Theology." *A New Look at Christian Morality,* pp. 73-124; "Natural Law and Contemporary Moral Theology," *Contemporary Problems in Moral Theology,* pp. 97-158.

[17]Curran has recently defended the thesis that there is *not* a distinctively Christian ethic, that the hypothesis of a strict dichotomy between Christian and non-Christian ethics is unfounded. Cf. Charles Curran, "Dialogue With Humanism: Is There a Distinctively Christian Ethic?" *Catholic Moral Theology in Dialogue,* pp. 1-23.

> the conclusion of this brief historical summary is this: the natural law cannot be the adequate explanation of the generic insistence on universally valid, absolute norms of conduct in Catholic moral theology.[18]

In the future, such norms will have to undergo a closer scrutiny.

Basically, Curran is a revisionist in natural law theory. While respectful of the value of this tradition, he considers it imperative that practitioners of natural law analysis be more circumspect in their judgments and that other alternative methodologies be given a fair hearing. Catholic moral theology is not inextricably tied to natural law. Reality comes first, and only when a particular theory is helpful in isolating moral factors and in discerning appropriate responses will it be creditably accepted.

B. *Curran's Understanding of Niebuhr.* As a student of Bernard Haring,[19] the language of 'response-responsibility' was familiar to Curran long before he became involved with the writings of H. Richard Niebuhr. And it is not evident that Curran has ever learned to differentiate between the theologically nuanced positions of the two men. He seems rather to have believed that the image of man-the-responder could satisfactorily convey both a scriptural 'Word-response' motif and a modern appreciation of man's creative involvement in the world. According to Curran, Niebuhr's typological approach has served to provide a third ethical type (responsibility) which is not overweighted with questionable philosophical presuppositions of the other two types. Yet Curran is not particularly concerned to identify with the full rationale which went into Niebuhr's own formulation. For example, Curran says,

> Niebuhr adopted the image of man the responder for philosophical reasons, but there are other reasons for adopting such an approach in interpreting the ethical teaching of the Scriptures.[20]

In another place Curran gives an inkling of his hesitations about Niebuhr's full position, but he does not elaborate on it.[21]

In *The Responsible Self* Niebuhr claims that the values of the deontological and teleological approaches to ethics have been taken

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[18]Curran, "Absolute Norms in Moral Theology," p. 86.

[19]Cf. Bernard Haring, *The Law of Christ,* vol. 1, (Westminister: Newman, 1966), pp. 35-53.

[20]Curran, *Contemporary Problems in Moral Theology,* p. 235.

[21]"I believe that the biblical renewal . . . has brought about he same emphasis on the model of relationality and responsibility in Catholic moral theology without necessarily accepting all the presuppositions of a Barthian theology of the Word." Curran, "Dialogue With the Scriptures," *Catholic Moral Theology in Dialogue,* p. 30.

up and transformed in an ethics of responsibility.[22] Curran, on the other hand, expresses a great reluctance to give whole-hearted acceptance to this one approach. His view seems to be that the good and the right and the normative may be easily lost by a one-sided stress on responsibiilty.[23] In this context, Curran is critical of the way in which Paul Lehmann has employed the responsibility image.[24] Thus, it appears that Curran, because of his natural law background and general orientation, wants to preserve the best of the older approaches by employing the newer responsibility approach somewhat selectively.

> In my understanding of Christian ethics the primary model should be that of responsibility and relationality, but there remains a need for some teleological and deontological considerations even though they are of secondary importance. The model of responsibility without denying the place of goals and norms also gives priority to the more active and creative aspects of the Christian life.[25]

Curran accepts Niebuhr's ethics of responsibility as a new approach more in line with various currents of modern thought. But he has appropriated it only at the most general level of analysis. The closer Curran gets to dealing with concrete issues the more dependent he is on philosophical and theological presuppositions which are different from, and often contradictory to, Niebuhr's. Curran himself admits.

> I have employed the motif of responsibility but also raised the cautionary note that responsibility tends to be a term which all would favor but remains capable of many different interpretations. For this reason in the future theologians might have to adopt more specific models which flesh out the more generic approach of the model of responsibility.[26]

C. *Curran's Ethics of Responsibility.* When Curran begins to 'flesh out' his own development of an ethics of responsibility, it becomes clear that he is very dependent upon a type of modified natural law theory. While morality cannot be equated with conformity to pre-established structures and biological determinations, it can still be understood as intrinsic, objective and realistic.[27] This is possible

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[22]Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self,* p. 145.

[23]Curran, Dialogue With a Theology of the Church," *Catholic Moral Theology in Dialogue,* p. 157.

[24]Curran, "Social Ethics and Method in Moral Theology," *Contemporary Problems in Moral Theology,* p. 237.

[25]Curran, "Dialogue With the Scriptures," pp. 32-34.

[26]Curran, "Dialogue With a Theology of the Church," p. 156.

[27]Curran, "Christian Responsibility," *A New Look at Christian Morality,* p. 244.

once it is recognized that a person is constituted by the relationships into which he enters. These relationships are objective and normative, yet they remain variable in terms of specific circumstances. To be responsible is a matter of being perceptive in evaluating these ontological factors and of being creative in responding to them.

Curran has described a series of contemporary errors which explain why he is wary of abandoning the normative tradition of natural law in moving to a responsibility position.[28] First is the Protestant tendency toward 'theological actualism,' that is, a tendency to downplay obligation and the imperativeness of rules (e.g., Barth, Bonhoeffer, Lehmann, Sittler). This has led to an unwarranted specificity in describing the will of God in concrete situations. Second is a 'consequentialism' which reduces all reality to a means-ends model. Third is a minimization of the physical and material aspects of reality. Fourth, and finally, is a 'sheer existentialism' which allows the isolated moment to be ethically determinative. Because of the possibilty of each of these errors creeping into responsibility ethics, Curran maintains that it must always have some place for norms and principles, even if on a much reduced scale.

In Curran's attempt to dovetail a modified natural law position with an ethics of responsibiilty, two seeming values of the older approach could easily be lost: its clarity of analysis and its authoritative pronouncement. Aware of this, Curran tries to indicate the appropriate manner in which these values can be essentially preserved.

The advantage of a *deductive* analysis on the basis of an agreed upon set of moral principles was that disagreements could be arbitrated in terms of certain rules of logic and common sense. If two principles seemed to be in conflict (e.g., in the case of war), the theological community could debate various ways of understanding how to reconcile the seeming opposition. Subsidary principles could be developed which facilitated the discussion (e.g., the principle of double effect). But, according to Curran, ethicists can no longer proceed in this way. In an ethics of responsibility, there is need for a more *inductive* methodology which remains open to change, development and tension. The ethicist has to rely to a greater extent on the physical and social sciences, as well as on the experience of the Christion people, in order to determine the significant operative factors in a particular situation. Out of this raw material, certain moral generalizations can be derived which, while lacking the precision and clarity

[28]Cf. Curran, "Moral Theology Today," *Contemporary Problems in Moral Theology*, pp. 242-265, esp. pp. 246-257.

of the deductive method, will remain in closer correspondence with the reality experienced.

The second value of the traditional natural law approach was that it allowed for the possibility of authoritative pronouncements by the magisterium, or teaching office, of the Church. Curran foresees a much more restricted role for the hierarchical magisterium in the future. The tentativeness of most moral judgments will militate against a frequent expression of opinion on behalf of the universal Church. The shift toward the adoption of responsibility as the primary normative motif in moral theology has been accompanied, at least in the Catholic Church, with a shift to the notion of 'coresponsibility' in ecclesiology. And, as the Church becomes more democratic in its structures, the nature and forms of its moral guidance will change accordingly. Thus Curran, employing the categories of Edward LeRoy Long,[29] says that the Catholic moral tradition will become less institutional (i.e., concerned with order and structure) and more operational (i.e., concerned with strategy and concrete action in situations of power conflict). The Catholic Church through its democratized structure hopefully will speak out less imperiously but more effectively.

Curran sums up his own hopes for the future of an ethics of responsibility, as well as the coordinated task of ethicists, when he says,

> A proper understanding of responsibility as a normative model for moral theology does not eliminate the need for moral theology but raises very important questions about the lesser but precise function of norms, the values to be sought, the dispositions which characterize the responsible self and above all a critical understanding of the moral judgment.[30]

D. *A Theology of Compromise.* Curran's most original contribution to the current methodological debate in ethics (his theology of compromise) is really an attempt to harmonize the objective, normative claims of natural law theory with the stress on creativity and responsiveness of an ethics of responsibility. Curran developed this position in an article in which he discussed the situationism of Joseph Fletcher.[31] While admitting that situation ethics has rightly pointed to the problems connected with the defense of negative moral absolutes, Curran still asserts that moral situations can be described ob-

[29]Edward LeRoy Long, *A Survey of Christian Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

[30]Curran, "Dialogue With a Theology of the Church," p. 174.

[31]Curran, "Dialogue With Joseph Fletcher," *A New Look at Christian Morality,* pp. 159-176.

jectively and that judgments can be rendered in terms of certain moral ideals.

The basic theological presupposition involved in a theology of compromise is that man's freedom of response is determined both by the kind of person he is and by the kind of social structures within which he acts. Curran suggests that the harsh reality of sin intrudes at both of these levels to a greater extent than is usually recognized in Catholic moral theology, although not as decisively as many Protestants would claim. Sin is an ever-present part of the moral situation. But there are various possible ways to sort out the implications of this fact for ethical decision-making. Some would claim that the responsible man will always avoid acting in situations where sin is involved. Others would only employ the category subjectively and affirm any action done with a good will. Curran tries to mediate these two stances by preserving both the objective and subjective poles in the analysis.

In the historical background of a theology of compromise are three factors: (1) the traditional distinction between formal sin and material sin, (2) the possibility of choosing the lesser of two evils, and (3) the recognition of the sin of the world. With these factors in mind and conscious of a certain continuity with the tradition of Catholic theology, Curran defines his position.

> In the face of the sinful situation man must do the best he can. The destructive and disruptive influence of sin frequently prevents man from doing what he would want to do in the given situation.[32]

There is an objective good which should be realized in a particular context, but often subjectively man is incapable of fully realizing such a good. The best interpretation is to speak of a compromise.

> Compromise . . . indicates that the person cannot be entirely at ease in making such a decision. In a sense the Christian always has an uneasy conscience. . . . Compromise maintains that in a sense the action is good because the person can do nothing else at the present time. However, in a certain sense the action is wrong and manifests the presence of sin in the world.

For Curran, the responsible man is one who will take the risk of decision-making even in the midst of a situation of compromise. He also recognizes that sin is an inescapable component of many of the contexts out of which a person operates. It is important for him to

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 171.

acknowledge the unsatisfactoriness of this predicament at the same time that he has the courage to do his best (to maximize the degree of good) under the circumstances.

In summary, it may be said that Charles Curran has appropriated Niebuhr's ethics of responsibility in a limited way. While he employs Neibuhr's language to describe his own methodological position, the meaning-context is much different. Nowhere, for instance, does he accept the inevitability of Niebuhr's claim that historical relativism has destroyed the possibility of making universal ontological claims. Curran wishes to preserve the objective and normative component of a modified natural law ethic even though he defines its normative status in relational terms. Furthermore, in his proposal for a theology of compromise,[34] Curran reveals his hesitancy to abandon objective judgments of situations. Curran's ethics of responsibility is a generic position which advocates a creative, dynamic view of morality akin to that of Niebuhr, but at a more specific level it significantly diverges from Niebuhr in the direction of an ontology of personhood.

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[33]*Ibid.*, p. 173.

[34]For a sympathetic discussion of Curran's theology of compromise see: N. D. O'Donoghue. "Towards a Theory of Exceptions," *Irish Theological Quarterly,* 35, July 1968, pp. 217-232, and Norbert Rigali, "The Unity of the Moral Order," *Chicago Studies,* 8, Summer, 1969, pp. 125-143. For a critical discussion see: William E. May, *Becoming Human: An Invitation to Christian Ethics* (Dayton: Pflaum, 1975), pp. 128-130.